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Original Article

### Attributes of Alumni Engagement Practices in Universities in Uganda

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This paper explores alumni engagement practices in three universities in Uganda. Despite the fact that university alumni in Uganda are often well-educated, successful and uniquely strengthened by vast intergenerational social capital networks, a lot still leaves to be desired to inspire their alumni to give back their time wealth and talent. Universities' alumni engagement programs are largely characterized by money donated and attendance at alumni events. This apparent detachment raises concerns about fundraising and long-term financial sustainability. The study used a multiple case design which relied primarily upon qualitative methods with purposive sampling. Data was collected using interviews and document analysis. The findings of the study identified that reunion events, endowment funds, infrastructure development, fundraising, creation of alumni chapters and giving awards to the best students are the main alumni engagement practices in universities in Uganda. Two major themes were identified from the categorizations and they were discussed as communication and networking. It was concluded that reunion events such as annual alumni dinners, annual general meetings, annual sports days and homecoming events are held to foster or build alumni relationships and to form the goodwill that translates into monetary donations. The endowment fund is aimed at mobilizing funds to invest for the benefit of the university. Such funds are realized from students' contributions and fundraising done on different occasions while alumni chapters are established as networks of alumni in different geographical locations to simplify communication among the alumni living in the same area, they also ease the facilitation of periodical regional alumni meetings for social activities, professional networking and promotion of their universities.

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## INTRODUCTION

Alumni support through research, curricular development, property, buildings and equipment, and community outreach for universities has long been integral to the institution's growth and sustainability. Charitable support from alumni has long been a significant component of funding higher education in the U.S. The history of educational philanthropy in Europe can be traced back to medieval universities in twelfth-century Europe. In these institutions, founders were forced to approach potential donors for money and resources for college operations. Wealthy individuals established endowments to support the universities of Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge. Although the history of alumni engagement in the USA and Europe can succinctly be explained, it is still problematic to explicitly trace the evolution of alumni engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) in general and Uganda in particular. Since alumni engagement is both relational and transactional involving the alumni and their alma mater through a range of activities, the Social Exchange Theory (SET) was adopted as an appropriate lens to understand the phenomenon. Social exchange theory explains the social behaviour in dyadic and collective relations by applying the principle of a cost-benefit analysis of relations (Davlembayeva & Alamanos, 2023). Grimes, (2020) defines alumni engagement as a group of behaviors in which alumni: "dedicate their time to their alma mater, donate their talents to their alma mater, make a financial gift to their alma mater, and/or interact with fellow alumni in ways which enhance the alma mater's social capital networks of collaboration and/or community" (p.4). The main objective of this article is to explore practices that constitute alumni engagement in universities in Uganda. The findings will provide a foundation to offer evidence-based feedback on the problem of practice and guide the formation of key recommendations which will better inform universities' future strategy on alumni engagement. In addition, this research will contribute to the practice of leadership within universities, specifically in the field of alumni relations.

## RELATED LITERATURE

Existing literature on alumni engagement in universities is largely based on Higher education institutions in Europe, Asia, the USA and elsewhere in Africa which reveals a gap in scholarly research in universities in Uganda. Several studies have been conducted on what constitutes alumni engagement in universities. Some researchers have shown that alumni loyalty partly constitutes alumni engagement. Alumni loyalty includes both material and non-material support to the institution. Alumni-giving behaviour is one vivid example of material understanding (Iskhakova, et al 2017; Snijders 2019). This loyalty stems from the long-lasting relationship built with students that extends after graduation. This also leads to non-monetary contributions from the alumni. There seems to be general disagreement on what alumni loyalty is. Whereas Iskhakova, et al (2017) illustrated how researchers from different disciplines perceive the term alumni loyalty; some have a purely material understanding and operate with terms such as alumni giving and repurchase behaviour; others have a nonmaterial perspective. Their study shows that alumni loyalty should be considered as a valuation in both material and nonmaterial alumni support attributed to attitudinal and behavioural aspects. However, Snijders et al. (2019) focused on exploring drivers for non-monetary alumni behaviour which is alumni loyalty in Dutch universities. Their study supports the importance of relationship quality dimensions for initiating long-lasting relationships with students even after their graduation, and for establishing non-monetary contributions in terms of alumni loyalty.

The above opinion is in tandem with Cownie and Gallo (2020) who posit that alumni activities are a manifestation of gratitude to the alma mater reciprocating the services received. They examined experiences of gratitude amongst alumni in a UK university to find out how they prompt reciprocal behaviours in the form of alumni engagement and fuel ongoing interactions between alumni and their alma mater to the benefit of alumni, current students, institutions and academics. They found out that gratitude helps to sustain mutually beneficial relationships between alumni, institutions and academics aiding alumni engagement strategies.

Consistent with Pedro, et al (2018) alumni activities are a show of commitment to the educational institution in the form of willingness to continue educational training in the school, willingness to recommend the course/school to others and willingness to give back. It is for such reasons that conventional universities take alumni as an important alternative source of income (Rust, 2012). Pedro, et al (2018) identified determinants for the commitment relationship maintenance between the alumni and the alma mater using a public School integrated into the University of Algarve, Portugal. They found out that alumni are willing to commit through collaborative initiatives, such as seminars, talks with students and visits to companies.

In the South African context, Rust (2012) investigated the role of alumni associations as an alternative income for universities. The main activities of an alumni association were to create a desire among ex-students to identify themselves with their university; to generate and sustain interest and participation in the affairs of their alma mater; to contribute to the developments of the university; and to promote the university's name and reputation. According to Rust, (2012) the formation of alumni associations is to maintain identity with the former university which could then generate interest including financial support as well as participating in other university activities. This pattern is stronger in Western countries than in Uganda and thus a gap that the study intends to fill.

Others like Weerts and Cabrera, (2018) assert that the giving capacity of alumni in the US is related to prosocial and civic behaviour that is expressed by students while at college. Those patterns relate to financial support for their alma mater after graduation. These include membership in sports associations, religious groups and charities. It is in such associations that charitable acts are learnt and cultivated. As a result, they will show a strong inclination to give further in the form of seminars, talks, charitable gifts to their alma mater, visits and money. However, the determinant factors are image, satisfaction, cordial relationship, school innovativeness, employability of former students and quality of educational training received (Pedro, Pererira et al 2018).

The Social Exchange theory (SET) was adopted as a theoretical framework for this study. First developed by the sociologist George Homans, it was popularized by Peter Blau and Richard Emerson (Emerson, 1976). Social exchange theory states that "actions are contingent upon rewarding reactions from others" (Blau, 1964, p. 31). The theory suggests that human actions are based on the positive reactions of others (Blau, 1964). According to this theory, alumni and their alma maters are interdependent. They share a social tie and have an unwritten commitment to engage in activities of mutual benefit (Lisa, 2014). Thus SET gives a model for interpreting society as a series of interactions which generate obligations and interdependence.

The norm of reciprocity also plays a key role in social exchange theory because it provides a moral lens to guide exchanges (McDonough, 2017). It creates the expectation that rewards or profits are exchanged accordingly between parties and that in addition to helping those who have helped you, you should also do them no harm. The assumption of this study is that alumni engagement practices are contingent upon the advantages alumni perceive to have received or believe they will receive from the relationship.

Therefore, a review of the literature related to alumni engagement suggests that there are known practices for engaging alumni and known strategies for targeting improvement in alumni engagement outcomes.

## METHODOLOGY

The multiple case study design was used. Relying primarily upon qualitative methods with purposive sampling. Interview guides and document reviews were the main data collection instruments. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with eleven participants in three universities in Uganda who were chairpersons/presidents of alumni associations, prominent alumni as well as some who are administrative leaders in universities that share common elements with alumni relations. One academic registrar, two alumni relations officers, two personnel from the alumni associations and six prominent alumni represented the participants. Criteria for the selection of participants are based on the possession of current information about alumni

activities in their respective universities. In addition, the composition of participants included some administrators of alumni associations. The selection of the sample is the most significant limitation of the study. A purposive sample such as this substantially limits the internal validity of the study, as the alumni who were selected and interviewed are not fully representative of the large population of alumni in the three universities.

After conducting the interviews, the data was coded and categorized using Microsoft Excel to code and identify two themes: communication and networking that were illustrative of the central research question: What constitutes alumni engagement practices in universities in Uganda? These themes were coalesced into a thematic matrix reflecting key elements of the theoretical framework of social exchange theory; namely costs and benefits.

In order to draw upon additional sources of evidence in the study by reading, analysing, and interpreting documents. This involved reviewing the legal and policy provisions, management and governance frameworks, critical elements and features of functioning alumni associations in universities. The key documents reviewed to enrich the data included the University Strategic Plan, statutory documents, Annual Reports, Newsletters, and Alumni network magazines. Other documents were the University Alumni Association Strategic Plans and University Alumni Association Constitutions. The documents provided contextual richness and data culled from these sources were used to help inform our interview data, and vice versa. A review of documents prompted new lines of inquiry and was instrumental in refining concepts and themes that I had unearthed through the interview and matrix creation processes.

## FINDINGS

Findings in this study surfaced around the following core concepts of communication and networking. Communication entails social media, websites, emails, newsletters, reunions, telephones and publications. Networking comprises alumni chapters, mentorship, cultivating relationships, social media and job offers.

The use of telephones was identified as one means of communication to alumni. Telephone contacts are used to create lists for bulk SMS and make voice calls to alumni. To this was the use of collective networks to promote alumni who are shining as individuals, career professionals, business people or social entrepreneurs through producing an electronic or printed quarterly newsletter featuring selected alumni profiles, producing and publishing feature stories on selected alumni profiles in mainstream and social media. Publications on alumni activities and discourses can be developed and disseminated to other stakeholders. A document analysis of the University B Alumni Network Newsletter, dated October 2013 revealed that in their communication the Editorial Committee thanked the alumni community for the contribution of the Great Gate Complex to the university. This shows that the alumni acknowledge the quality and quantity of their University initiation (p.4).

It was also highlighted that:

The Alumni Network Magazine endeavours to make linkages to as many alumni as possible. We encourage you to use this platform to share ideas and information by sending your articles to the editor. This will enable us to create a vigorous, lively and dynamic network (p.4).

The alumni president in his message stated:

Plans are underway to publish an online newsletter in order to widen our circulation. We have managed to accumulate a reasonable amount of funds for the alumni association....we have completed the construction of the main university gate and part of the perimeter wall fence using the alumni funds..... I also appeal to you not to miss the following activities: the Annual General Meeting, Alumni Dinner Dance, and Chancellor's fundraising dinner (p.5).

The newsletter further records that; the University is undertaking a fundraising drive for the purpose of constructing a new modern administration building. As a result, a fundraising dinner was held on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2012. The dinner was attended by alumni, friends and staff of the university. The proceeds in pledges and cash at the dinner including cheques totaled Ushs. 137,245,000/= . The university staff



and alumni earlier made contributions in cement worth Ushs. 11,159,000/=. As stated:

The dinner constituted an ongoing process towards infrastructural development with respect to lecture rooms, offices of various staff members including the Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor as well as other structures vital to the academic development of the university (p.12).

Other communication channels involve organizing for identified alumni to feature on television and radio talk shows on relevant topical issues, and organising public forums like conferences, seminars, workshops, live audiences, talk shows, debates and public lectures where alumni feature as presenters. Among these faculty or college-based lectures must be organized regularly. On this particular aspect, B3 insists that:

One way is to design programs that are diverse in order to attract youthful alumni, senior alumni, professional ones and those in the business community. For example, the homecoming day attracts mainly the youthful alumni while public lectures like the annual memorial lecture attract elderly alumni. Then the signature events such as the distinguished alumni awards dinner attract prominent alumni.

In addition, there is developing and managing an interactive web portal which provides up-to-date information on the activities and the dynamic profiles of members. This involves mobilizing and engaging alumni through offline /online communication and information/ knowledge management platforms. In relation, there is creating and managing active accounts on various social media platforms and continuously updating information on those accounts. There was general agreement among interviewees that alumni engagement is undertaken through social networking. For example, A2 reported the establishment of a Facebook account which however became inactive. He thus stated that:

There was a Facebook page with a university logo. Upcoming events were posted there. However, Facebook was closed in Uganda on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2021 and it ceased being operational.

Relatedly, C2 from a private university shared that, their social networking started with the establishment of a Facebook account but has gone further to create WhatsApp groups. He said:

More than five have been created based on schools and faculties. They are generally for sharing similar information and updating alumni on a daily basis, for example, about jobs within and outside the university. Job adverts are posted there since priority for employment within the university is given to alumni. This daily communication makes them feel attached to their Alma mater.

In a similar vein, B2 asserts that:

Alumni offer internship opportunities and help to place students. Four internship memorandums of understanding have been signed between the university and organizations that alumni head. With such an arrangement a given number of students are absorbed every year.

From the above, it is evident that the use of social media is an emerging communication and engagement strategy for alumni. Alumni associations have a presence on social media channels. They are avenues for social networking and relationship building.

The University Alumni Associations utilize e-mail communications to keep in touch with its membership base and to provide information about upcoming alumni events and other opportunities. E-mail communications are considered a two-way channel as they allow for direct interaction between sender and recipient. For example, C1 stated that:

Our University Alumni Association has more than 20,000 alumni with 80% of emails and telephone contacts held.

Of equal importance, there is creating emailing lists for alumni and sending out alerts on up-to-date communications. Alumni Associations utilize e-mail communications to keep in touch with their membership base and to provide information about upcoming alumni events and other opportunities. E-mail communications are considered a two-way channel as they allow for direct interaction between sender and recipient. Interviewee B1 concurs on the same issue that:

An alumni register was put in the certificate office to capture details from the alumni who picked up their academic transcripts and certificates. There are 9,346 alumni in the database with email addresses and telephone numbers. We even go the extra mile to trace our alumni using LinkedIn. It has proved a successful venture though costly.

Creating a populated database with all alumni details and developing an interactive online system to capture their details can intensify the registration process. The website provides links to news releases and news stories as well as access to photo and video galleries from university events. These online communication channels are considered two-way channels. In this regard, interviewee A1 emphasized that:

The website is a great reference for alumni to browse and get complete information about all events including academics, cultural, religious, and sports associations and clubs. I appeal to all alumni to register using the registration form on the website.

Similarly, A2 held that efforts have been taken to build an alumni database. He said:

Our over 400,000 living alumni stretch beyond East Africa, Africa, and the world in governance, business, diplomacy and development. The system is an initiative designed to build a digital and interactive alumni database where all our Alumni and friends can create accounts and update their bio-data, digitally donate funds towards different causes in the university, provide real-time updates on events running in the University and improve service delivery regarding donations, news, alumni and stakeholder management through a streamlined, integrated, efficient and effective platform.

Networking involves holding activities that bring alumni together such as organizing annual reunions, fun days, career days, and enrolling volunteers in alumni activities. Beyond this, there is developing and regularly updating alumni and or students about potential internship job placement opportunities and matching eligible students/ graduates accordingly. However, it is imperative to prepare and connect suitable alumni to prospective job opportunities and contracts.

In relation to the above, interviewee C2 stated that:

Alumni dinners are annual events that take place in April while an annual general meeting is usually held in December. The annual sports events constitute football matches held between alumni against staff and or students.

In the same vein, interviewee A2 echoed that:

Reunion dinners are held in order to build relations with the alumni. This was partly through the planned Chancellor's Dinner arranged in 2020 but failed to take place due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, one was held in 2022 to celebrate 100 years of the university's existence.

The above statement highlights that fundraising programs necessitate communication with potential donors such as alumni. Communications with alumni for fundraising purposes should be frequent because they contain solicitations or appeals for donations. The potential effectiveness of any social media platform as a method of communication and engagement lies in the frequency of engagement in specific Facebook activities such as responding to announced fundraising events. Social networks like Facebook have a definite influence on alumni's willingness to donate since individuals are more likely to provide financial support to organizations with which they more strongly identify.

Building networks around chapters is another way through a mechanism to mobilize and engage Alumni. This can be a twofold approach of either creating new or strengthening existing chapters intended for effective mobilization and increased participation of members. As a caution, there must be specific criteria developed for establishing alumni chapters. Guidelines must be developed for establishing and operating a chapter. Modules must be developed for inducting chapter leaders. The induction of chapter leaders can either be face-to-face or virtual for ease. Alumni associations must also develop and disseminate an annual call for proposals among chapters on alumni engagement projects. Relatedly interviewee A3 stated that:

Alumni chapters in his university have taken two forms; one is that of academic disciplines and the other is for international students (regional). The

first chapter was Music, Dance and Drama (MDD) alumni launched in 2016. In 2020 the Kenya Chapter was launched. The former president Mwai Kibaki is the patron and Professor Nyang Nyong is the chairperson. Rwandese alumni have formed one and they hold social events and support each other in holding weddings. The initiative for starting chapters comes from the chapter itself and this bottom-up approach has made members own up.

On the part of interviewee B1, there are both regional and international alumni chapters in their university.

Regional chapters have been created in Mbale, Masaka and Hoima districts of Uganda to reach out to alumni in those areas. International chapters have been planned for the alumni in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and South Sudan.

Alumni engagement is also included in the university's strategic plans as a deliberate effort. B1 emphasizes that:

In partnership development Uganda Martyrs University draws its strengths from collaboration with several stakeholders both within and outside of Uganda. The stakeholders are drawn from all walks of life including the alumni. Activities of the different stakeholders and partnerships include the development of fundraising mechanisms to generate income for specific projects defined by the University and the specific collaborative partnership agreements.

## DISCUSSION

Universities' alumni engagement programs lack creative strategy and valid measures beyond money donated and attendance at alumni events (CASE, 2018). Alumni Engagement is an individual's participation in any university-related activities that occur after his or her graduation. Activities include but are not limited to, attending events, joining the alumni association, making a contribution to the university, following or interacting with the university's social media and volunteering in some capacity at the college. This study purposely explored alumni engagement practices in universities in Uganda. From the findings of this

study, two major themes including communication and networking were identified.

The current study established alumni engagement practices such as reunion events, endowment funds, infrastructure development, fundraising creation of alumni chapters and giving awards to best students. Regarding reunion events, the findings revealed that the annual alumni dinners, annual general meetings, annual sports days and homecoming events cut across both private and public universities. The only difference is that they are more visible in the private universities than the public ones. All the study participants agreed that reunion events are held to foster or build alumni relationships and to form goodwill that translates into monetary donations. These events exhibit alumni loyalty to their universities. It should be noted however that alumni loyalty includes both material and non-material support to the institution (Iskhakova, et al, 2017; Snijders 2019). This loyalty stems from the long-lasting relationship built with students that extends after graduation. This also leads to monetary and non-monetary contributions from the alumni.

The endowment fund is aimed at mobilizing funds to invest for the benefit of the university. Such funds are realized from students' contributions and fundraising done on different occasions. Where they exist, they are categorized as onshore and offshore funds. The onshore funds are endowment funds in Uganda invested in mainly government securities such as bonds and treasury bills. The offshore endowment funds are invested in mainly equities in the United Kingdom. In order to raise funds for the different causes, the fund has built a digital and interactive alumni database. This is in line with existing literature, foremost Etcuban, (2015) who posits that the implementation of an alumni database system helps to build and sustain a relationship with alumni that encourages them to participate in University activities. Besides, an alumni database system is by far a better tool, cost-saving, and time-saving mechanism than the traditional method of recording data. It also streamlines the dissemination of relevant developments to alumni as stakeholders.

Alumni chapters are established as networks of alumni in different geographical locations to simplify communication among the alumni living in

the same area, they also ease the facilitation of periodical regional alumni meetings for social activities, professional networking and promotion of their universities. This is similar to clustering alumni into segments to better understand their characteristics, lifestyles, types of behaviour and interests (Rattanamethawong, et al 2017). Segmentation in this case is based on residence and nationality for the case of regional and international chapters. Currently, universities are focusing on alumni relationship management in order to improve engagement.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the fact that the potential of university alumni engagement has not yet been actualized, many of the ingredients for its success are present. Alumni are deeply proud of their alma mater; and multiple alumni affinity groups. Universities need to diversify their alumni engagement practices beyond traditional events and fundraising. The goal of these recommendations is to enable universities to foster more meaningful and impactful forms of alumni engagement.

Firstly, it is recommended that universities should undertake alumni mobilization and engagement through promoting and utilizing alumni information, communication and fundraising; creating and consolidating alumni chapters; appointing and deploying endowment fund champions and ambassadors; institutionalizing outstanding alumni awards to recognize and bring on board alumni occupying positions of power and influence in various parts of the world.

Secondly, the capacity to mobilize funds, gifts and other resources should be strengthened through soliciting donations towards various causes championed by the alumni funds; and regularizing annual fundraising activities.

Finally, universities should maintain resourceful alumni databases. Databases for alumni are vital to every learning institution. The data and information are needed to communicate, verify, archive and research the alumni. These are also used to validate the gap between the knowledge and skills possessed by the graduates and the required qualifications needed by industries. It determines the effectiveness

of instructions in the college and the achievement of its graduates. Since alumni are one of the most important assets of higher universities They are the product of the curriculum, facilities and equipment that best represent them in the real setting, data and information of alumni are significant in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of programs offered by the universities. For these reasons, it should be stored in the repository for future use.

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