ENHANCING THE ROLE OF ALUMNI IN THE GROWTH OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract: The primary mission of higher education is to serve the human person and society through its work of teaching, training, research, and inquiry and its collaboration and partnership with various bodies. Any educational institution's reputation depends upon good academic performance, exciting extra-curricular activities, a conducive environment, diversity of student support services, and investments. However, another critical factor that only requires support and encouragement and brings strength and expansion to the institution's reputation and progress is effective engagement with the Alma Mater's alumni. Alumni Associations create a space where alumni can interact within a community of people who share a unique experience. Their primary focus is to strengthen alumni relations between students and alumni while promoting and working for the University's growth and development in diverse ways. Indeed, alumni are ambassadors of their alma mater and are vital for revenue mobilization and placement opportunities for students. Undoubtedly, the alumni's role is crucial for the growth and development of higher education institutions. So, how can Universities get the most from their graduates? University alumni relations professionals need to develop innovative strategies and explore the skills needed to thrive in this fast-changing higher education landscape in Africa. Alumni may provide meaningful support to actualize different aspects of the university enterprise, which can be mutually beneficial to the key stakeholders, including students, graduates, alumni, the University, and society. To achieve the University's vision and mission, it is imperative that the University's management and faculty respect and value the opinions and strategic recommendations proposed by the Alumni to solve some of the University's critical challenges. In that regard, the Alumni can contribute immensely to enhance the University's national and international reputation and visibility if adequately harnessed. Therefore, to promote and strengthen the University's growth and development, successful alumni involvement and engagements could serve as the social model to foster unity of purpose of society in general. This paper's focus was to highlight the critical role of Alumni in the growth of tertiary education institutions and how to involve the alumni in universities' affairs to enlist their contributions and increase their impact on the University community.

Keywords: Alumni, University, higher education institutions, role, Alumni associations

INTRODUCTION

Higher education's primary mission is to advance the people and society through its work of teaching, training, research, and in-depth inquiry, and its collaboration and partnership with various stakeholders for mutual benefits (Bhattacharya and Sharma, 2007; Gerrard, 2015). Higher education plays an essential role in opening up new pathways to a more enlightened and better future aspirations for individuals and society (Pandey, 2005; Johnstone, 2010; Mayer and Wilde, 2015; Effah, 2015). Quality higher education is an essential investment in the rapid development of human capital because it significantly increases the productivity of labour, enhances technological innovations, and produces substantially higher returns than that of physical capital (Isani, 2003; Oblinger, 2012; Vroijenstijn, 2014; Obeng-Ofori and Anane, 2015). Therefore, higher education institutions play a vital role in the optimal personal growth and development of individuals to enable them to lead a more productive and happy life in society (Masland, 1985; Mayer and Wilde, 2015; Effah, 2015). Alumni Associations create a space for meaningful interaction among key stakeholders with shared aspirations and experiences with the primary focus of strengthening relations between students and its alumni and promoting and working for the growth and development of the universities in diverse ways. Alumni Associations may undertake projects and activities that seek to enhance the University's image and profile and individuals' personal growth. Indeed, alumni are ambassadors of their alma mater and are vital for revenue mobilization and placement opportunities for students. So how can universities get the most from their graduates? Traditionally, Universities have reached out to their alumni through hospitality events, also called "homecoming days' or networking events."

In a rapidly changing educational sector, where students are expected to pay more, how will the demands on alumni change, and what new tools can Universities use to transform graduates into active and useful alumni? Technology is also
rather dynamic and revolutionizes the way people interact and get their information (Bok, 2004). What impact will this have on alumni relations? Many Universities are already grappling with these questions, and some interesting projects are starting as a result. University alumni relations professionals need to develop innovative strategies and explore the skills needed to thrive in this fast-changing higher education landscape in Africa.

The alumni's role is crucial for the growth and development of higher education institutions (Anila and Waqar, 2012). Alumni may provide meaningful support to actualize different aspects of the University enterprise, which can be mutually beneficial to the key stakeholders, including students, graduates, alumni, the University, and society. To achieve the University's vision and mission, it is imperative that the Management and Faculty of the University respect and value the opinions and strategic recommendations proposed by the Alumni to solve some of the University's critical challenges. In that regard, the Alumni can contribute immensely to enhance the University's national and international reputation and visibility if adequately harnessed (Anila and Waqar, 2012). Therefore, to promote and strengthen the University's growth and development, active alumni involvement and engagements could serve as the social model to foster unity of purpose of society in general. It also creates an environment whereby alumni can associate socially and professionally and provide a mechanism for them to interact with each other and the University.

This paper focuses on involving alumni in the Universities' affairs to enlist their contributions and increase their impact on the University community. Alumni serve as a unique stakeholder for any institution, and their only interest is to see the University or an Institute flourish and grow in stature because the more their institutions grow in stature, the better it is for the alumni. This makes them a unique stakeholder as all other stakeholders like students, faculty, staff, and management have other stakes. Academic leadership at all levels must provide a conducive climate to enable alumni to play their role as a responsible and essential stakeholder (Cuthbert, 2002). To a large extent, what alumni do with their lives may define the stature of a University. Universities must provide a strong foundation for future alumni to do well in life, including good education from a dedicated faculty and a healthy value system of academic honesty, hard work, and professionalism. The alumni's support and voluntary contributions to their Universities play a critical role in the maintenance and expansion of these Universities. Therefore, all responsible University Management must take pragmatic steps to establish effective communication channels to facilitate closer ties between the alumni, students, and universities. Such engagements foster unity of purpose and enrich students’ intellectual and social experience in the universities (Kumar, 2008). It is worth noting that every alumnum has had previous experience of being a student and becoming a unique and different graduate. Thus, all alumni can contribute to the growth and development of the University in different ways and scales.

ROLE OF ALUMNI IN THE GROWTH OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS
Alumni play a critical role in the growth and development of Universities all over the world, including the following:

Continuous Engagement with the Institutions
Staying engaged with the institutions is extremely important. This may include visiting and interacting with faculty and students, responding to emails, providing contact information to the institutions, visiting the institutions’ websites regularly to keep abreast of what is happening, giving suggestions and feedback, etc. The University-Alumni engagement model begins from interest and responsibility to build mutually beneficial and enduring relationships.

Financial and other Contributions
Alumni must give back to their alma maters, financially and otherwise. For their institutions to be healthy and protect themselves from interference from outside, financial autonomy is essential. Towards this, as has been shown by great Universities of the world, a substantial endowment fund is necessary. Two Universities with the largest endowment funds globally are Harvard University and Al Azhar, with substantial alumni contributions. It is no surprise that almost all Universities throughout the world have established endowment funds where alumni play a crucial role as contributors and fundraisers. Besides, institutions must provide opportunities for well-endowed alumni to establish Chairs, Fellowships, Scholarships, Awards, etc., at their respective Universities to promote research and scholarship.

Role model and Inspiration
Alumni can serve as effective role models and Inspiration to a diverse group of students to enhance institutional credibility and visibility. Alumni can share useful personal experiences with students on diverse aspects of the academic and social life, including adequate time and financial management, self-discipline and character formation, soft skills, and
career choices. In the long run, such alumni-student interactions can inspire self-confidence and self-esteem, enhance self-motivation, and inculcate the right mindset in line with the University's culture and traditions.

Career Mentor
With many public and private Universities in Africa, there is intense competition for the relatively limited available jobs in the market. This is mainly due to the larger number of graduates than the limited number of job opportunities. Job availability is scarce in many sectors, and the considerable unemployment has become a security issue, especially in the African continent. Final year students must be able to identify their career prospects in good time. Functioning Alumni have a critical role to play to support the students in diverse ways. One key area of support is mentoring them on career opportunities in the job market. Alumni can also open channels for students to undertake practical learning or internships to gain work experience in some of the alumni work institutions.

Providing Expertise
Alumni can provide their expertise in developing innovative academic programmes and revision of curriculum in the University. Alumni can serve as guest lecturers, advisors on statutory or Adhoc committees, and acting as experts in the industry and collaborative project partners with the University. Furthermore, Alumni can promote research by facilitating the entry of the University into industry networks locally or internationally to establish mutually beneficial collaborations and partnerships. This provides opportunities for the University to develop emerging technologies by applying the theories that have been analyzed and tested with other industry experts. Successful research collaboration between the University and industry in terms of knowledge transfer will immensely improve the University's capacity and reputation nationally and globally.

Opportunity to access Professional Development
The senior and successful alumni can serve as a pool of professional talents for university students and younger alumni. When the corporate world, industry positively recognize outstanding alumni of the University and the wider society, it can create a strong network and trust in the University community. This can serve as an effective channel for the younger alumni from the University to access diverse opportunities to enhance their career progression and professional conduct.

Improve Student Recruitment Efforts
Alumni can encourage students, especially their family and friends, to consider their University as a higher quality education provider. Thus, alumni can actively support the recruitment efforts of qualified and deserving students to attend the University.

Support the University's Reputation
A vibrant alumni association can raise and maintain the stature of the University worldwide. The positive views, opinions, and statements that alumni present about their University using various channels such as print, electronic and social media, conferences, workshops, seminars, and other stakeholder engagements can enhance the reputation University (Jalan and Tambahan, 2015). Due to the public perception that the alumni are more reliable and understanding of the University's challenges, the alumni's positive sentiments and interactions can influence the community's recognition of the University. Alumni that have distinguished themselves creditably and successfully in various sectors, either nationally or globally, have more or less authenticated the quality and effectiveness of the teaching, research, and service to the community provided by the University. Accordingly, the University with more influential and distinguished alumni serving in favorably place positions in their work will have higher recognition and reputation in the tertiary education landscape.

Institutional Governance
Most higher education institutions worldwide have representations of alumni on their governing Councils and Boards and other statutory Boards and Committees to enhance institutional governance. Such Alumni bring their practical experience to bear on the decisions and policies of the University.

ALUMNI ASSOCIATIONS
Alumni Associations play a crucial role in awaking the students about opportunities available in the job market. Such associations provide students with authentic information on job opportunities available in their particular fields and
specialization areas. Alumni Association also organizes regular activities and programmes through which the students can keep in touch with their universities even after completing their studies. They play an influential role in the upbringing of the University. Alumni associations often organize social events, publish newsletters or magazines, raise funds for Universities, and help students who are currently studying in diverse ways. Additionally, such associations support young and new alumni and provide a forum that enhances new friendships and business relationships with people of similar backgrounds and interests. An Alumni Association is committed to spreading awareness of philanthropy's importance and strengthening the bond between students and alumni. Its mission is to spearhead students' philanthropy projects that help bring campus-wide understanding of service's importance to humanity. The Associations provide support to Universities and organize alumni events, including reunion and regional events. They work with the career development and admission office and other campus units on matters of importance to alumni and students. One of the Alumni Association's vital roles is to keep the Alumni Office informed of the students' up-to-date addresses. Information on prominent alumni is also kept at the University's Alumni Office. A functioning Alumni Association, therefore, stimulates intellectual discourse, community service, and social events.

Furthermore, Alumni Associations create a space where alumni can interact with a community of people with shared interests and experiences. They also engage students throughout their academic careers to form a stronger bond with the University and its alumni body. It is a crucial mechanism used to support and manage student-related matters outside the classroom. It may analyze the examination results, conduct quality analysis of performance, monitor high flyers, and propose remedial measures for weak students. Thus, the Alumni Association's primary focus is to strengthen relations between students and alumni in the University's best interest.

Furthermore, Alumni Associations provide guidelines for the students to cope with changes, hurdles, and time challenges. It shapes the students' academic and professional life and provides a useful forum for the students to share their shared knowledge and experiences and also enable them to be aware of new trends in their respective fields and society within and outside the country. The feedback from both faculty and students recognizes the importance of Alumni Associations in higher education institutions' growth. Such associations engage their members in the University's work to serve the alumni community in all its diversity and help the University develop linkages with different professionals. As a human network, the Alumni Association promotes the welfare of University, broadens and sustains friendship among alumni, students, and faculty. In addition, Alumni provide new graduates with valuable contacts and an effective platform for career guidance and counseling and promote leadership and administrative qualities of students and young alumni.

**Other functions of Alumni Associations include:**

- Helping students to lead a good life by engaging them in meaningful service-oriented programmes.
- Providing a helping hand to those who are currently studying and to those who need professional help from their seniors at their working places.
- Organizing annual career counseling seminars/discussion/workshops for final-year students helps them select appropriate careers.
- Assisting in mobilizing financial and other resources for the University.
- Preserving and keeping the standard of the University high.
- Enhancing the University's traditions and culture through the organization of social and related events at the University.
- Supporting the University's educational vision and mission by preserving its heritage, promoting its advancement, and assisting the University to achieve prominence and maintain its integrity.

The University Management should facilitate Alumni Associations' establishment in every private and public University and provide opportunities for the alumni of different Universities to share their strengths, experiences, and ideas on the new trends, issues, and changes in their respective fields other than their University. The Management of Universities should also actively encourage faculty to engage the Alumni in the delivery of lectures, research, seminars, and workshops about career guidance and specialized areas to enhance academic quality in their institutions.

**Alumni Associations must develop their constitutions and bye-laws to guide their operations. Some of the key objectives of Alumni Associations include the following, among others:**

- Assist in fundraising for the University for scholarships, infrastructural development, capital equipment, establishment of Chairs, and other purposes identified by the Association and the University.
- Support the academic programmes by giving input to the curriculum to meet the industry and society's needs.
c. Provide mechanisms for interaction with University students through the Students Representative Councils (SRC) in events and activities, including but not limited to career fairs, mentorship programmes, retreats, and professional forums.
d. Form Chapters of the Alumni within the Faculties to reach out to the members of specific professions and specializations.
e. Form coordination offices of the Alumni within the country and the rest of the world to reach out to more members.
f. Promote, improve and protect the interests of the members and the Alumni's welfare.
g. Establish collaborative links with other Alumni bodies and organizations both locally and internationally with similar interests.
h. Participate in the deliberations of the governing Councils of universities and any other events in the Alumni and the University's interest.
i. Pursue these aims and objectives independent of political, religious, gender, racial, tribal, personal bias, or any other discrimination attribute.

ENHANCING ALUMNI RELATIONS BY UNIVERSITY MANAGEMENT
Management of higher education institutions has greater responsibility to promote and facilitate the Alumni Associations' work to derive maximum mutual benefits (Mohammedh, 2010; Alina, 2013). What incentives, rigorous publicity or marketability, persuasions, and processes or mechanisms could universities adopt to reach their alumni? Some of the strategies that can support and facilitate the establishment and effective functioning of vibrant Alumni Associations may include the following:

Alumni Relations Office
Management of Universities must set up Alumni Relations Office manned by trained professionals to facilitate and coordinate the University's relationships with the Alumni. Alumni's expertise should be brought to bear on Universities' governance at all levels, including membership of governing Councils, Advisory Boards, and specific important Ad-hoc Committees. Key Alumni should participate in important University events such as matriculation, congregation, job fairs, etc. This will go a long way to advance the vision, mission, goals, and aspirations of the University. Industry champions could be invited to present seminars and interact and mentor students.

Up-to-date Student Records
In this globalised and knowledge-based economy, up-to-date information on undergraduate and graduate students is crucial for effective monitoring and assessment of the progress of students. Student records should be updated systematically to ensure that at any given time correct biodata of former and current students is available and accessible. The contact information of all current and former students including telephone number, permanent address for correspondence, email address, skype address, website etc. must be easily available in the database for easy reference. Universities need adequate and correct database to enable them assess the effectiveness of their academic programmes against progress indicators.

Student Support Services
Tertiary institutions all over the world are expected to promote a multicultural academic diversity stimulated by globalization. Therefore, all aspects of University life must include student services to meet new challenges of providing more guidance and counseling to students to discover their academic pathways in a more flexible and conducive academic and social environment. Due to the imperatives of continuous growth, diversification, and globalization, students' academic, social, or cultural lives are more challenging to understand and resolve to their satisfaction. The creation of efficient student services that are well focused and ensure adequate support for the academic enterprise and stimulate personal, social, cultural, and cognitive development is needed. The concept of student services refers to the divisions, units, or departments that provide specific services and student support in higher education to promote students' growth and development during the academic experience. It is worth noting that student services originated in Athenian education and Universities, but it is generally recognized as an American phenomenon in the modern era. There are different shapes, scales, and intensities of student services provided by Universities in different countries. In some countries, units or divisions with student services professionals are well defined and resourced to function more effectively, but it is an emergent phenomenon that needs to be strengthened in others. In the wake of the increasing diversity of students admitted into Universities, there has been an evolution of additional support services that have contributed to students' academic
and personal development. These include academic and soft skills development programmes, building entrepreneurship mindset, and specific support to students who have difficulty learning or adapting to University life. Such services in no small way contribute to the quality of the academic experience and help students achieve their learning potential. The structure and functioning of student services varies from country to country. In some countries, these services are provided by specific units or departments of the University, while in others, such as in France, they are outsourced to specialized organizations such as CNOUS and CROUX.

University Management must take particular interest and responsibility to support and enhance the student experience (academic, professional, social, welfare, etc.) from the time students are admitted into the University to become alumni. This is critical to the success and growth of higher education for both the student and the University. There is no doubt that efficient student services adapted to students' needs have a critical role in improving students' academic experience. It is of paramount necessity that University Management understands and appreciates the concept of student services and the crucial role they play in shaping students' academic and social lives. This will stimulate and contribute immensely to enabling policies and strategies to promote the continuous quality improvement of the academic enterprise. The composition of the student group, the knowledge, and beliefs of academic and administrative staff will influence the manner and responsibility in which the student programmes and services are delivered. The World Declaration on Higher Education (UNESCO, 1999) highlights the need to develop student services worldwide.

The value of student services needs greater recognition, support, and development in all students' interests because they contribute to the quality of students' learning experience and academic success, reduce the University dropout rate, and enhance the students' life diversity. More importantly, the provision of adequate support services to a diversity of students encourages a more transparent and open method of making rational decisions and resolving conflicts that may arise from time to time, in this way to prepare students for active involvement in society (Audin and Davy, 2003; Alina, 2013). Higher education must challenge students' world view and empowers them to think beyond the primary, ordinary physical and self-fulfilling rationale for obtaining higher education and transform them into knowledgeable people with real practical ability and competencies to provide selfless service to society. Higher education institutions must provide services and programmes that promote student life quality, meet its needs, and improve learning and success achievements for the public good. Student support services help to decrease the university dropout rate and increase the diversity of students' experience. Without effective student services, students who do not have an academic, emotional and social connection with the institution at a cultural level are more likely to give up their studies. Another essential role of student support services is to prepare students for active participation in society. This will contribute to increased learning opportunities and community engagement by students, which may be achieved by promoting internships, experiential attachments, or short-term industry experiences integrated into the curricula (UNESCO, 2002). These services encourage and establish more open methods of making rational decisions and resolving conflicts.

The more Universities can invest substantially in a wide range of services to students, the better they can meet student development and learning needs. This will enable the University to maintain a high index of student satisfaction and reduce the university dropout rate level. Among the services available to students, the most important are those which meet their academic, personal development, and emotional needs. Some of the important student support services are guidance and counseling services; tutorial system; internships and experiential experience; community engagement programmes; skills development (entrepreneurship clinics); recreational and sports facilities; student financial aids office; child care centers; information centers; career centers; ideas competitions, alumni homecoming events, alumni lecture series, etc.

According to Alina (2013), efficient student services enhance relationship with academic institutions as follows:

- a. Provides support that explains the values, mission, and objectives of the institution.
- b. Participates in leadership and takes part in decision-making.
- c. Evaluates the social experiences of students in order to improve programme efficiency and quality.
- d. Establishes policies and programmes that contribute to campus safety and support its values by developing and improving students' standards.
- e. Supports the student's participation in institutional governance.
- f. Provides essential services such as information on admissions, registration, counseling, financial aid, health, housing etc. in accordance with the institution's mission and objectives.
- g. Serves as the institutional resource to work with students individually or in groups.
h. Encourages Student-University interaction through specific programmes and activities.

i. Supports and contributes to the creation of ethnic and cultural diversity.

j. Takes a leadership role in crises and conflict management.

k. Contributes intellectually and professionally to the life of the University.

l. Establishes and maintains effective working relationships with the local community.

**On relationship with students, Alina (2013) lists the following:**

a. Assists students in transition to university life.

b. Help students to explore and clarify their values.

c. Encourages the development of relationships and friendships and a sense of belonging to a campus community.

d. Assists in identifying financial aid resources for needy students.

e. Creates opportunities to expand the cultural and aesthetic horizons of students.

f. Sensitizes students on how to resolve personal and group conflicts.

g. Provides special programmes and services for students who have learning difficulties.

h. Contributes to the understanding and appreciation of ethnic differences, diversity, racial challenges.

i. Creates opportunities for leadership development of students.

j. Establishes programmes that encourage a healthy lifestyle and reduces misbehavior of students.

k. Provides opportunities for recreation and leisure.

l. Provides counseling and career guidance, helping to clarify professional goals, exploring options for further study or career choices.

**Strengthening Faculty Engagement**

Strengthening faculty engagement with Alumni is crucial. To ensure continuous quality improvement in teaching and learning, alumni's involvement and contribution is of categorical imperative. Alumni can play a useful role in the revision of curriculum, development of new academic programmes, delivery of lectures on specific topical issues, research proposal development, identification of funding sources, outreach programmes, etc. This will enhance the alignment of academic programmes and student experience to industry needs to improve their competitiveness in the globalized world.

**Organization of Alumni Events**

Regular organization of events purposely to stimulate the interests of Alumni to the business of Universities is useful for deriving maximum benefits from former graduates. Such events create space for the Senior University Management to interact with alumni to be aware of its current direction and critical needs. Examples of such events are Vice-Chancellor's/President's breakfast meetings, dinners, open days, career counseling durbars, time with alumni, alumni lectures, etc.

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**CONCLUSION**

The alumni's role is crucial for the development of higher education institutions throughout the world. Alumni can provide essential support to students, graduates, young alumni, Universities, and society. The alumni are an asset to the University, and their contributions and involvement can significantly increase the University's reputation nationally and globally. Strengthening student services contributes to the quality of students' learning experience and academic success, reduces the University dropout rate, and enhances the students’ life diversity. It also encourages a more transparent and open method of making rational decisions and resolving conflicts to better prepare students for active society involvement. Alumni Associations create a space for meaningful interaction among key stakeholders with shared aspirations and experiences with the primary focus of strengthening relations between students and its alumni and promoting and working for the growth and development of the universities in diverse ways. As ambassadors of their alma mater, alumni are vital for revenue mobilization and placement opportunities for students. Management of higher
education institutions, therefore, has greater responsibility to promote and facilitate the work of the Alumni Associations in order to derive maximum mutual benefits.

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