UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATION AND RESPONSIBILITY TOOLS STRENGHTHENING THEIR EFFICIENCY

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Abstract

In this paper we review ways in which universities manage their access to the future. We examine how responsibly they create and communicate information to potential students, alumni, and the public. Consequences for quality attributes for the university and its specific group relationships are discussed with a view to alumni systems. The discussion of these topics can bring valuable ideas for more communicative and responsible university activities aimed at the future, especially for universities in countries where external or internal conditions for future relationships building have not for years been strong enough.

Key Words

Alumni, Alumni System, Responsibility, Relationship, Environmental Powers, Ranking of Reputation, University

Introduction

Major challenges to businesses and organizations, including universities, are: increasing productivity, technological change and innovation, social responsibilities, ethics, ability to be (internationally) competitive, and to have timely, accurate information. A successful university, keeping in mind and solving the above challenges, provides the necessary education, knowledge and relationships to enable students to make effective career choices, to assert themselves, and bring to the university a never-ending, mutually profitable relationship. The paper will attempt to answer the following questions: In which ways is the university "business as usual?" and Do the ways and means used by Czech universities for communication and responsibility for the future match those of the best universities worldwide?

University access to the management of responsibility and communication, from the future point of view, will be evaluated on the basis of existing alumni systems and on the scale of published evaluation in the press. The data will be used as well from universities web pages, from school projects led by the author and from personal experience of authors from Harvard Business School (HBS) and University of Economics Prague (UEP).

The University and its Business

A university must effectively coordinate its actions in order to coordinate diverse university activities, and must be a place of sharing - not only by distributing duties and responsibilities, but by being a source of imagination and innovation (Cabal, 1993).

Every university has a number of responsibilities. As a foundation, a university provides a high quality of education and research, which includes responsibility for the quality of the "university product" and for societal development. With students it aims to: "...*have a key role in providing students with strategies and competences to allow them to be part of the current information society and hence to be able to develop a productive career"* (Gutert , Remau, www.elearningpapers.eu, 2009). These aims are the primary university business and responsibilities. What are the others? We can use a simplified comparison with several other disciplines. For example, with a process of creation values or with new concepts of creating a relationship with customers.

Customer Relationship Management *"is considered as one of the basic resources of a company's competitiveness"* (Gála , Pour, Toman, 2006: 165). Education can be viewed as a business offering a product and responding to market demands. Both statements lead to the conclusion, that a student is both – a product and a customer from his/her pre to post phases.

Phase 1: Potential student as potential customer evaluates positive university values with a view to becoming its customer: Is the university reputation best? e.g. in the country. Is the ratio of university alumni experiencing high levels of success in the labour market high?

Phase 2: The university comes along future students selection process. One attribute for university status is a meaningful rate of applicants to accepted students.

Phase 3: Student as a product and as a customer. The student, as an input, goes through transformation to turn into a succesful university output. Student evaluates, during his/her studies, the benefits of the process of education.

Phase 4: Alumni evaluates phases 1-3 and has active/passive/no relationship with the university.

Other variables influencing the functioning and the future of the university belong usually "environmental powers". Inside the university we can state e.g.: academic staff reputation, programme curriculum updating, teaching potential in disciplines, scope of vertical and horizontal communication, treatment of individuals and their outlook on success, (non) rigidity of faculty/department boundaries, research capacity and research profiles, capability in partnership with business practice, and the internationalization of education. Of course, we must take into account the powers of the external environment as well - economic, political, technological, and culture - and their influence on universities.

The basic orientation of the university should be to understand how the world is changing and to follow this understanding to prepare students for the future – for the challenges and rewards of companies who can change the world. Fundamentally, "do we know what" and "do we know how" to be sure that the university business runs efficiently and effectively to build upon unique strengths.

As the example we introduce some innovation of educational process presented by prestigious Universities. "*Yale set out in the fall of 2006 to create a distinctive new model of management education, one that eliminated traditional discipline-based courses and replaced them with courses designed to integrate teaching and learning across disciplinary boundaries. After two years of a new curriculum, response has been amazing, not only from our faculty and students but also from recruiters and other business schools. Our students still possess the same technical skills that they had under the old curriculum, but they now have a much better appreciation of the context within which those technical skills need to be applied*" (Podolny, 2008). Stanford Lets

Students Customize (Joss, 2008): "*The core idea is that students are permitted to tailor their course work to an unprecedented degree. There are three levels of difficulty. Basic, accelerated, advanced. There is more than 100 electives to pursue specialized knowledge. To tie together gaining knowledge and achieving student goals must student before graduating attend Synthesis Seminar. The main aim is to get students to think across disciplines and functions. It also brings more number of small-group courses.*"

Lack of university innovation responsibility, communication responsibility and "a personal touch" leads to poor student relationships with the university and poor alumni pride.

Rating a University's Reputation

Every business begins with the customer and his needs. Every business aims its efforts at obtaining some profit. Every business fills customer needs and gains profit through good strategies, information, human resources, and technologies. It is not possible to make a profit without maintaining good relationships with customers. Companies build customer marketing performance, customer relationship management and other tools for good relationships with customers. Universities should act in the same ways, "in a desire to obtain customers." Satisfied university customers disseminate its reputation and it brings new customers or old customers back. From this point of view the university business is like other businesses. In accordance with CRM programs, the university needs to establish four integrated elements to create substantial value. To have a strategy for customer managing (in our case the alumni relationship), to build compelling and well-executed programmes, to support activities with technology, and to to have the ability to organize and deliver the services over time.

Public University Ratings

Who prepares the rankings: government agency (e.g. Ministry of Higher Education), independent organizations, newspaper/ magazine or accreditaiton agency. International ratings follow the type of institution conducting the rating internationally.

The "Times University Ratings" (universities.suite101.com, 2008) provides the most significant criterion for judging a university's reputation. 50% is assigned for quality by academic experts and employers. 20% is gained for citation number in scientific papers. 20% point is generated by the ratio of students to educators. And the last 10% is determined by the rate of foreign students and educators studying and working in the university. The best three Universities in the World (autumn 2008) are: Harvard University (US), Yale University (US), University of Cambridge (UK). The best Czech Universities are: Charles University (261. range) and ČVUT (414. range).

Also the "Eduniversal Palms" (eduniversal.com, 2008) indicates the level of an academic institution's international reputation for the best 1,000 Business Schools in the world. From October 2007 to March 2008, the 1,000 selected business schools' deans voted to give their recommendations about business schools to the Eduniversal Official Selection. The international criteria were based on the following elements: the accreditations obtained by the schools; the main classifications (Financial Times, Shanghai Jiao Tong, Business Week, Asia -week, Wall Street Journal, and others.); participation in international academic associations; the network of partners of Deans and Business Schools at the international and local levels; reputed studies and sites in the world of education and universities.

Also in the Czech Republic two daily magazines (HN, 23.2.2009, LN, 29.1.2009) executed and published in January and February 2009 results of the comparison of Czech Universities. The main criteria of this study were: research results, interest students in studying at concrete school, number of students completing one year of study in a foreign country, how many courses students can follow in a foreign language, and how the universities maintain a relationship with their alumni.

For the purposes of this paper we will aim at the university rating on the basis of the alumni criteria. This evaluation, based on this criteria, resulted from the survey of the alumni assertion in practice. Some schools extended the criteria to include the estimation of satisfaction with the quality, expertness and rigour of education, pay evaluation of alumni, disparity between alumni perceptions and the market reality, and the contribution of their university studies to life and career. Criteria "Alumni" were followed up, because the alumni can be an influential resource in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the school. Professionally successful alumni were taken as signs of excellent school. This kind of survey is not common in the Czech Republic, therefore, an integrated methodology does not exist. Therefore, the results just reflect the situation, whether or not the school takes the question of alumni into consideration and how many detailed results this field provides. Altogether, thirty-two schools were evaluated. Twenty-five schools were concerned with alumni criteria. Masaryk University Brno (MU) was the absolute winner in the evaluation of various fields of study.

Other criteria, in relation to alumni, can be the view of employers, and the view of students – potential alumni. Companies do not share a unified view of desirable criteria for alumni and the filed of study e.g. of informatics. Some employers' preferences are concerned with businesslike ability, some to good knowledge and gained work experience, some to a broad spectrum where

the alumni can find employment, some to the incorporation of the technical and managerial orientation.

The alumni assertion (employment rate) into the labour market is rated (LN, 29.1. 2009) at the sample of twenty-two economic public schools at 100–94%. From faculties of informatics the alumni success is 98-99%. Students evaluated the school for the following points: recommending study at the faculty to potential students, evaluation of educators and development of professional competency during the studies. Hihg evaluation (more than 70 from 100 points) got 5 from 22 faculties. The faculty of informatics and management of the University of Hradec Králové (77 points) placed first, the faculty of informatics and statistics of University of economics Prague (73 points) placed second.

Alumni system

Alumni are counted as pillars of universities' greatness. They play many critical roles for the university – returning to teach and to learn, counselling graduating students, serving on advisory boards, providing financial resources for programs to execute the university's mission.

"A system is an organized combination of parts which form a complex entity, with interrelationships or interactions between the parts and between the system and the environment" (Appleby, 1991: 18). Social system consists of motivated individual actors interacting with each other, where values and norms are the major patterns of relationships.

An alumni system is social system. It allows (encourages, executes, maintains and develops) social networks and mutually advantageous cooperation between the university and the alumni. According to (Horný, 2003) the social system is a complex of humans - as the system elements and their social relations. Its basic functions are (Department of Psychology and Sociology, UEP, 2008):

- "Accommodation – readjustment to the external environment influence *(note of author – see e.g. an example of the studies innovation at Yale).*
- Aims reaching - main reason for the existence of social system *(note of author - e.g. thanks to innovation and to system sustaining customers and gaining new customers).*
- Integration – tangible link of single cells of the system *(note of author – linkage of the university functioning to potential students, students and alumni).*
- Standards maintenance which are determining suitable system behaviour *(note of author – to get lessons form traditions and best practice of other universities).*"

Alumni systems generates social networks, interconnects groups of people on the basis of common social interests given by the university character. A social network gives the alumni system a place for communication and information sharing, based, namely, on the application of modern ICT.

The alumni system's primary mission is to develop and maintain a knowledgeable and involved alumni as a constituent part dedicated to the welfare of the university. Alumni systems should have some entrepreneurial attributes – e.g. to focus on opportunities, to be concerned with effectiveness and efficiency, to focus on the customer, to discover ways of improving performance, to concentrate on satisfying customer needs, to be proactive rather than reactive.

Contemporary reality is based less on face-to-face communication, is more dynamic, and quickly paced. On the other side, the means of IT/ICT are a great supporter for communication and give great space for an exchange or sharing

of information, knowledge, and news. This direction is logically reflected in the alumni systems, published usually as a part of the university or as a separate web sites. Alumni, students, potential students, firms, and the public have direct access to information, which can support not only virtual, but also face-to-face (official, private, personal, and group) communication and build relationships to the university and to other members or subjects in the community. This effort is supported by leading universities with direct periodical e-mail communication to registered (or all) alumni. Besides this communication channel other channels include yearly forwarding of the directory or quarterly forwarding the alumni bulletin, and various types of meetings (life-long education courses, reunion).

The alumni system is usually built, maintained and presented by an alumni association. This is an association of graduates (alumni) mainly organized around the university or its faculties, or among students who have studied in a certain city, region or country. They often organize social events, publish newsletters or magazines, raise funds, support alumni, provide forum to form friendships ("old boy" network) and relationships with the university, and business relationships with people of similar backgrounds. The role of alumni association goes through their existence to new ones. *According to Smith (2006) "With a vision for Virginia Tech that intends to move the university into a higher level of academic and research accomplishment, the Alumni Association will need to be alert for changes to the alumni profiles as well as needs of the university. The role of an alumni association of any university is two-fold. It must address the needs and interests of both the association of alumni and the university. Primary reasons for the existence of an alumni association are to know and understand the interests of the alumni community and to provide programs for individuals, affinity groups and the alumni community at large. It*

is a portal that provides a retrospective, yet current view into the university, opening opportunities for alumni to either stay involved or re-associate themselves with their alma mater. The second, but equally important reason is the university itself. The association must know and understand the interests and objectives of the university. It provides an avenue for the continuing education and engagement of its alumni, serving them and cultivating their support."

The construction of a successful alumni system requires taking into consideration the whole complexity of various points of view: Historical tradition and contemporary conditions form the access of society members to people networking. The priority which the university gives to the alumni system in the context with other activities is important, as is the rate of notification and clarification of the possible contribution of the alumni system to the university.

In the Czech Republic, the tradition of building networks and relationships from any organization to its members and vice-versa is historically not very strong. Czech universities are, with the entrance into EU, under pressure on significant new actions such as: the accreditation process, establishing a new credit system, creating new curricula, and the internationalization of education. Tradition, educational priorities, and lack of experience with carrying on alumni systems successfully, are some of the causes for existing conditions with more formally established alumni systems which offer limited services and opportunities when compared to western universities.

Arguments and beliefs for the existence of alumni systems at the university are:

- alumni are most important ambassadors of the university, they can be counted as image-makers of the university,
- to sustain positive student experience and, afterwards,

alumni interest, involvement and input are essential to long-term relationships and support of the university,

- alumni are a great source for feedback,
- alumni systems enables social and career networking among alumni, university and business,
- information, communication, events, developed and organized by university and meaningful to alumni needs, bring former students "back" and new students "in",
- increased interaction among alumni and alumni with the university results in a higher level of donations and involvement with university development,
- maintaining positive alumni relations is an excellent way of generating business and research,
- alumni are a great source for referrals.

Requirements for fulfilling the alumni system mission can be divided into four parts:

"Matter-of-fact" requirements include the design of information and actions in harmony and the compactness of the alumni profile and university needs. Basic items of western university alumni systems usually contain information about the directory, personal alumni profile (with possibility to update it), alumni notes, discussion groups, upcoming events and programmes, publications, research matters, reunion planning, alumni achievement awards, travel programmes, alumni benefits, contacts to alumni staff, university links, and alumni giving.

"Organizational" requirements involve who takes care about the alumni system. There are several possible "providers". One of them can be (usually is) the Alumni Association as an independent, non-profit organization with the board of directors (volunteers, elected by the alumni community),

executive director, secretary, and volunteer committees. A second possibility is, that the alumni staff is employed by the University, e.g. a "team/department of alumni relations". It is possibility to combine both as there is needed cooperation of professional university staff and the dual role of association (to serve to alumni and to the university).

"Financial" requirements can be solved through university funds, alumni membership fees, alumni giving, or private sector giving. The membership fee might be an obstacle to belong to alumni community at UEP (Havlan, 2008). In the Czech Republic alumni donations to universities are not common.

The "Technological" side of the alumni system is solved with the extensive support of information technology. The advantage of IT is evident. It is a tool for creating the computerized alumni database, web sites, community portals or extranets, which enable and support online university communication with alumni. The university can, using the IT tools, easily obtain contact information, maintain and update the alumni database, announce alumni programs, news and events, mail newsletters, categorize members by activity level, and view alumni giving summary. Alumni can interact with each other and stay in touch with university. It helps to increase interaction among alumni and with the university. Increased interaction usually results in increased satisfaction. Increased satisfaction results in a higher lever of involvement with university developments. Using a simple comparison of the university alumni public web sites shows that the content differs in particular from activities extension and provided services. Significant differences are seen in areas of further cooperation possibilities with the school, and in mutual relationship formation. Western universities base the alumni system management on experience and proficiency of a team of professionals formed for this purpose. A graduate

is expected to be a member of the alumni community. It is a privilege to become a member of an association alumni board. The variety in western universities activities constitutes a major difference. From a provision of life-long email, periodic information about university life, professional development, scientific results, publications, offered courses, reunion, up to own journal edition and travelling options, insurance, credit cards, and donations.

In addition, the Czech environment provides some interesting reasons for the less developed attitude towards alumni, which rise from the educational system. Havlan (2008) presents in his diploma thesis (lead by author) the following reasons identified at UEP in comparison with western universities: university education is very anonymous and individualistic, the educational system does not lead students to long term contacts, he/she has less friends, as he/she does not belong to any concrete study group, the system has no tradition and is maintained just by two people. Therefore many alumni never meet, never come back to school. The university has lost its investment, because the relationship was not established.

But every solution is not forever. Every built system must be revised and improved. A good example is given by one of the Netherlands universities in its strategic plan (Tilburg University, 2009). Part of it is: "strengthening the alumni network". The plan is to re-evaluate alumni relationships, to restructure the alumni association, to give access to a virtual Dutch and foreign alumni community through new web based alumni relations-management system, what should lead to more effective and efficient organization and relationship results.

Alumni Systems Comparison

Every alumni system usually has public information and protected information. Registered alumni have access to pages that are restricted to other visitors. University alumni systems are not standardized. The information is differently sorted and placed. These are the reasons why the comparison of more concrete subjects would lead to contentious results. Therefore, the comparison is based on generalized available information acquired from studying web alumni systems of foreign universities (e.g. Harvard University, Harvard Business School, University of Cambridge, University of Manitoba, Virginia Tech, Westminster College, University of Minnesota) and Czech universities (e.g. University of Economics in Prague, Charles University, Masaryk University Brno, Czech Technical University in Prague, University Hradec Králové, University of West Bohemia in Pilsen). Concrete comments will follow the personal experience of the author with the HBS and UEP alumni system. As criteria for alumni systems comparison were used: attention to the alumni database complexity, alumni services, communication channels, reunion, alumni benefits, and donations.

The attention to the alumni database complexity is, from the historical point of view, stronger at the western universities (including HBS). Even if UEP has quite a long history (founded at 1912 originally as "University of Commerce"), the problem is in the gap in information from "older alumni classes." In the last few years all graduates automatically obtained a lifelong e-mail address, which should facilitate communication between the alumni and the university. To acquire the complete database of all graduates would require more marketing activities by the use of various kinds of media.

Alumni services as a part of the alumni system of HBS and other western universities usually include an online directory (to facilitate communication among alumni, and for individual communication between the alumni and university), a search directory, a directory of services, my page, update your profile, email forwarding, alumni notes, discussion groups. In some cases it includes upcoming events, contacts to alumni staff, useful links. UEP alumni services are doubled. Alumni can be registered in "Econom Association" (EA founded 1991), which has 160 fee-paying members and several hundred just members; or in university "Development and counselling centre" (DCC). EA joins together alumni and other interested subjects (individuals or firms). DCC as a part of the university (with dominance the university part-time working staff-teachers from various faculties) is oriented to Partnership with the UEP and related PR activities, to Company presentations at the UEP and to Career and Psychological Counselling – it means that the services are oriented more to students and firms. The last section is the "alumni section", which is responsible for the alumni portal (alumni.vse.cz), where alumni can register and find upcoming events.

Communication channels at HBS are electronic or traditional. From the university, information is provided very regularly. The alumni communications office prepares and sends, through e-mail, a monthly a newsletter to every alumnus. The newsletter comprises news (e.g. videos online, conferences), events (virtual learning series, reunion, workshops), ideas in practice (e.g. in newsletter 18.5. 2009: "The Future of Management Education", "Managing in a Downturn"). Every alumnus receives, by mail, the HBS Alumni Quarterly Bulletin. The first part is aimed at actual themes (e.g. march 2009: health-care reform, faculty response to the financial crisis, Alumni in the News). The second part is devoted to Class Notes (alumni articles, photos). The alumni portal is the mail communication channel at UEP. Alumni are not automatically informed (neither by DCC and nor by EA), but must require sending information, when is registered. The main information tool for EA members is the bimonthly "UEP bulletin", which usually contains information that can also be found on the main UEP web site.

Reunions as an opportunity to reconnect with university colleagues, rediscover what the university means for alumni, learn about the ways that the university impacts the community, are regular activities, not only HBS, but all western universities. Reunions are usually held over several days. For this year, it usually covers the classes which graduate year is ended with 4 or 9. Invited are alumni, friends, and family members. Events include traditional class parties, campus tours, seminars and panels featuring the finest professors and alumni, and activities for the whole family. UEP organizes "The Day with UEP" once a year, which is organized by the university and EA and is aimed at all classes. This event includes discussions with leaders and teachers of faculties, but mainly is orientated on informal personal meetings and a cultural programme. In 2008 UEP 1,000 graduates attended. As it is usually announced on UEP web sites only, or the information is only distributed to registered alumni, "older alumni classes" usually do not take a part in this event and younger alumni classes must organize a place where they can meet.

Western universities (including HBS) usually offer alumni several benefits. They differ from university to university, but some of them are quite common: e.g. University Card & Discounts, Alumni Credit Card, Licensed Goods, Free Library Access, Alumni Insurance Program (for alumni and their family members), University Travel Benefits (hotels and car rentals),

Savings Connection (movie tickets, travel, shopping). The UEP provides some benefits for the EA, e.g. discounts in the library, or discounts for renting rooms for member firms.

Donations ("make a gift") as an alumni support for university funding of important strategic initiatives is, as opposed to western universities (including HBS), not a part of the UEP alumni system.

The recommendations and key findings for improving the alumni system functioning in the Czech environment:

- to develop and promote a clear vision of the alumni programme; outline its contributions to the university and its benefits to alumni; to count the programme as a multi-departmental initiative,
- to professionalize services on the university side, to support higher alumni involvement,
- to support building a complex alumni database,
- to implement a comprehensive alumni communication system,
- to carry out research on alumni interests and needs,
- to publish and electronically distribute the alumni bulletin to all alumni,
- to organize alumni conferences (intellectual homecoming),
- to involve prestige alumni in the alumni association,
- to involve alumni in education, research or solved projects,
- to implement step by step alumni benefits and donations.

Conclusion

Facts and trends indicated above force us to rethink some traditions. Every university should consider, as an instrument of communication and responsibility strengthening, systematically building relations with students and alumni, and building an efficient alumni system. In this respect, the university should bring its behaviour nearer to real practice. In the near future „The Cinderella" should necessarily become "The peer," otherwise, the threat of loosing sources and resources is significant. Every university "will be forced," by the dynamic environment and competition, to take into consideration, that a high-quality alumni system is, for the university, a great source of benefits: feed-back from the professions as a source for higher educational quality and for better students assertion; new incentives to the university or subject field curriculum; higher university image and influential standing; the advancement and support for pedagogy and research; the "storehouse" of external co-operators; the sponsorship (in technology, know-how, students projects, awards of distinguished activities, etc.); professional contributions or publicity in school magazines or conferences; the reference for new applicants, for relationship with public; the reputation through significant results, through prominent alumni. Every university has to development and implement its own strategy for an effective alumni system. The main reason for paying strong attention and improving the alumni system and relations is to strengthen the university position in strong competition for sources for future development. Benefits which bring component parts of alumni systems can differ, as the universities operate in different environments with different conditions, culture, and traditions. Concrete recommendations have to respect these differences. One of objective criteria could be (in the article just marginally mentioned) the number of

cooperating alumni. As an solid example (without analyze) is the information of HBS Alumni Relation (2009), prepared by the Alumni Communications office of Harvard Business School "What´s New at HBS – May 2009" as a part of the monthly electronically distributed bulletin to alumni – part Running the Numbers: 4 Days, 7 MBA classes, 46 Doctoral classes, 2600+ Alumni and guests attending. Other benefit would be in fees, or in visited events, or other kinds of cooperation, including visited www pages, and the level of donations. The effects just as a numbers has not high predicative value and usually are not publicly available especially in their relations.

The difference between the alumni systems is not only in the content of alumni web pages. It is in creating a culture and systematic education of students as potential graduates and alumni to the belonging and pride of being a part of the university. It is in communication with alumni through correctly tailored programmes and events, tailored according their (and university) needs and interests. It is in the assertion the real university interest in alumni community and relations with it. It is in following the numbers of alumni coming back, and the rate of their involvement in university activities. These, and there is no doubt, that many more points, can lead to the fulfilment of four blocks of competitive advantage – efficiency, quality, innovation and responsiveness to the "customer." to the understanding, that the university has the responsibility to alumni and alumni should have the responsibility to the university.

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