

“Student Career Progression and Alumni Network”

Background

As per the UGC Quality Mandate, UGC has to take initiatives on one of its verticals ‘*Student Career Progression and Alumni Network of Higher Education Quality Improvement Programme*’. Under this initiative, Institutions under the purview of UGC are to monitor Student Career Progression at every stage, in the age of ‘student centric learning’. This document provides a short note on alumni relations in the context of UGC and institutions under the purview of UGC.

The UGC is the apex regulator of higher education in India. Currently, 907 universities consisting of central universities, state universities, deemed to be universities and private universities are affiliated to UGC. These universities consist of more than 40,000 colleges that enrol nearly 3 crore students (source: UGC website). Nearly one crore students graduate from institutions under the purview of UGC every year. The UGC initiative on student career progression therefore requires to be addressed considering the objectives of the initiative as well as the required scalability.

More than 80% of students joining higher education terminate their education at undergraduate level. The undergraduate students typically secure admission to affiliated colleges and do not directly interact with the academic units of the university. To these students, the higher education experience is therefore limited to their college. Often, the admission information and details of enrolled students are maintained by their colleges, which are the custodians of this information. Therefore, the student career progression initiative has to suitably include students who have studied in colleges, who have been enrolled in academic units of the university, as well as education system network. The point when the student leaves college/university is a significant one for collecting data that could become base data for tracing future career progression of students. Suitable mechanisms to collect data at this point must be worked out. Transference of data from universities to its affiliated colleges must also be worked out. The biggest challenge is to track the students’ progression in humanities and any other non-professional streams of the education system. These students join numerous diverse careers and remain invisible and

unaccounted for in any database. However, the students from Social Sciences and Humanities are the ones who are generally spread across professions like politics, administration, education, health care, design, publishing, journalism, sports, law, business and construction, which are extremely relevant and significant for any HEIs and so the involvement of these groups of alumni can be very fruitful and meaningful for HEIs.

The UGC has proposed that under this initiative, alumni networks can also be established that can nurture long-term relationship between the universities, their affiliated colleges and its students. The alumni networks can thus extend beyond student career progression, and can be leveraged for mutually beneficial engagement between the alumni and the universities/colleges.

Dimensions of Alumni Engagement

Several international universities in different parts of the world have been carrying out active engagement with their alumni. Globally, alumni engagement initiatives at universities in the USA are regarded as the most successful. Several important ‘best practices’ that have global relevance have emerged from these experiences that foster engagement between the alumni and their alma mater. As is well known the primary stakeholders of a university include the founders, the administration, the faculty and staff, the students as well as the alumni. Of the primary stakeholders, the best practices recognise that the alumni are perhaps the most important stakeholder for nurturing long-term progress of a university and its students. To realize this, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should have alumni associations as part of their organizational hierarchy. Universities and colleges should have a formally defined structure of governance for their alumni association that clearly specifies the role of stakeholders.

The alumni are involved in a university’s activities in a number of different ways. The most visible involvement of the alumni is by contributing their time to participate in activities of the university, mentoring students, leveraging their contacts to support university administration, faculty and students in their various endeavours, etc. The alumni directly participate in the activities at the university campus as well as through participation in activities of alumni chapters at their place of residence/work outside the university premises. The alumni are able to provide real-world connection to the university and are thus able to make the university stakeholders more “world-ready.” This aspect of alumni involvement provides the opportunity to all interested

alumni to be engaged with the university irrespective of their professional and financial successes.

Another major visible activity of the alumni is by providing donations to the university. The donations can be of any size and can be either directed towards a specific activity or to support a range of activities. There are a number of pre-requisites for seeking major donations to the university. Most universities that regularly solicit large donations are able to provide income tax deduction to the donors. In India, the IITs and some other institutions provide 100% tax deduction under Section 80G of Income Tax Act, while several other institutions provide 50% tax deduction. It must also be kept in mind that a large number of alumni are settled outside the country. It is important to initiate and maintain contact with this group of alumni. The compliance of the university/colleges with the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) is a significant step in making overseas alumni donation possible. It is also important for universities to guide and support their affiliated and/or affiliated colleges regarding legal and financial aspects connected with this. It is sometimes argued that the alumni donate out of their commitment and desire to help the university, and not merely for tax planning purposes. However, the ability to provide suitable tax exemption is viewed as a demonstration of the university leadership's commitment to engage with well-wishers to carry out large-scale fundraising for the progress of the university. Large alumni donations and the causes they support are frequently reported in the media even though the large donors constitute only a miniscule fraction of all donors to the university. It may be noted that donations from the alumni and other well-wishers are almost never directed to meet revenue shortfall, if any, of the university. They are invariably contributed to support activities that the alumni are passionate to support. Quite often, the university recognises the contribution of the donors by naming physical or non-physical assets of the universities in honour of the donors.

Structured alumni involvement is important and can go a long way in assisting with student placements and internships. The alumni are able to provide opportunities to the students in their organisations, or/and are also able to leverage their contacts to provide opportunities in other organisations known to them. The placement opportunity can also be extended to alumni of the university in order to help with their mid-career transitions, which could be traced for adding to data regarding career progression.

At a higher level of involvement, the alumni participate at policy-level in the governing bodies of universities. Alumni involvement at the level of the governing body has now been now practiced in some universities for over a century. Only proven leaders from society who are also alumni are typically invited to the governing boards. They not only bring their proven leadership skills, but also contribute due to their knowledge of the finer points of the university's functioning. The alumni leaders also provide long-term vision for growth. They help to nurture and sustain pursuit of excellence over a long time-horizon. It is typically found that alumni involvement at policy level is more effective if the alumni leaders had also been actively engaged with the university during their early careers and are thus well versed with its growth since their own student days. The engagement with alumni during different phases of their careers is therefore very important for their successful engagement at leadership level.

The alumni also participate in various academic and non-academic advisory bodies of a university. Their participation helps to bring their professional experience to these bodies and is found to be very beneficial. Alumni chapters/clusters may be formed at regional level and these chapters may organize annual events for alumni in their catchment areas. Care should be taken so that the chapters/clusters undertake fundraising only to the extent required for the alumni events (for example, up to 20 % surplus fund may be retained by the chapters and the rest given to the university for its alumni-activities fund).

In addition to the engagement between the alumni and their universities, most major universities also undertake programs to enhance connection among the alumni, catalyse alumni groups with common interests through Special Interest Groups (SIGs), provide opportunities for their leadership and career development, etc.

The alumni who reach positions of eminence or are otherwise role models to the students are generally recognised by the university by bestowing them with distinguished alumnus/alumna and other similar awards. Many universities also recognise alumni volunteers with exceptional leadership towards alumni-engagement with awards to recognise their contribution to the university. Universities may also have other awards for the alumni. These awards not just recognise the achievement or contribution of the alumni, they are also intended to inform the current faculty, staff and students and position them as possible role models. Alumni as Chief Guests on important events like Annual Day, Foundation Day etc. also communicates the message of their being important for the HEI.

Mechanisms for Alumni Engagement

The alumni engagement needs to be highly coordinated by the university so that all activities connecting the alumni are managed through an alumni-relations wing headed by a very senior level official. The alumni-relations wing plans various initiatives and programs to engage alumni. They also either directly conduct the activities themselves, or in partnership with others. In other cases, they approve the activities being planned by either students, faculty or alumni groups. Care is taken that the alumni-relations are not decentralised, as global experience indicates their long-term negative impact.

The alumni-relations wing is also responsible for fundraising from alumni and other well-wishers. Global experience, which has been also observed in India, shows that fundraising requires long-term engagement with the alumni. It is not uncommon for the university leadership to engage with alumni for several years before they commit to large donations. The donors expect highest level of transparency in the utilisation of their donations. Periodic reporting, both financial and in terms of impact, is also generally expected for large donations. In order to be able to meet all these requirements, fundraising activities are highly centralised and are carried out under the alumni-relations wing of the university. The alumni-relations wing also provides the necessary financial documents to enable donors to claim income tax benefits on their donations.

Sometimes, the alumni donate physical assets and bequeath assets to the university. The management of these donations are also among the responsibilities of the alumni-relations wing. In the context of Indian universities, considering that undergraduate students engage mainly with the colleges, it will be desirable that both the university and their affiliated colleges establish their alumni-relations wing under a high-level official. The complexity of the relationship between the various universities and their affiliated/affiliated colleges must be kept in mind while structuring this framework. Sometimes affiliated colleges are spread across a fairly large distance from their affiliating universities. Or some colleges may be relatively more independent in their functioning than some affiliated colleges. Therefore, while financial transparency must be absolutely mandatory, functioning under one high-level official at the university level could become difficult and counter-productive. Depending upon the character of the college, the option of centralization of financial matters at the level of colleges could be explored and implemented. This also becomes pertinent in the background of 80% students

leaving HE after finishing their under-graduation and having connection with their colleges and not the universities. They may carry out various activities as well as fundraising in a coordinated manner. It is recommended that the Higher Education Institutions should have well defined fundraising, fund management and fund auditing/reporting process.

Universities also employ vast variety of indirect contact in order to keep the alumni updated about the latest developments at their university. The most common initiatives include newsletters (e-newsletters) incorporating information that invite alumni attention, phonation, alumni-contact-alumni programs, etc. In addition, every year institutions can observe 'Alumni Day' and organize events of alumni interest such as felicitation of 'favorite teacher' in connection with that.

Role of University Leadership

The alumni engagement with their universities and colleges require effective mechanisms by the university for its success. It has been found in globally reputed universities that alumni engagement is accorded highest level of importance by their leadership. Alumni engagement priorities are typically articulated at policy-level by the head of the university. The head of the university also takes the lead in engaging the alumni. In most globally reputed universities, the head of the university may devote 20% or more of his/her time for alumni engagement. They also travel frequently to engage with alumni groups as well as meeting prominent alumni in small groups or on one-to-one basis.

The alumni-relations wing of the university is typically headed by a senior official of the university (often from the 2nd level of university leadership). The wing is typically responsible for all alumni engagement initiatives, fundraising and often, for deployment of the funds raised through donations. The alumni-relations wing is also responsible for providing stewardship to the donors so that they are well-versed with the utilisation of their funds. The stewardship is generally not limited only to financial reporting and also includes providing information on the impact of the donations. Effective stewardship is also found to be essential for further fund raising from the donors.

The alumni-relations wing also requires their representatives to be embedded with the academic units, halls of residence and other entities of interest to the alumni at the university. They perform dual role at these positions, of both facilitating alumni-engagement with the unit as well

as assist in fundraising with the alumni of the unit. Often, student leaders are also included as members of the student-relations wing of the university. In addition, qualified professionals are employed at all levels for communication and connect related to alumni.

Alumni Database

A very critical requirement is to be able to contact the alumni in various ways (by phone, email, physical mail, etc.). It is also very important to have information regarding the career progress of the alumni. Preferably, it is also highly beneficial to possess information regarding the personal details such as family details, income or asset information, etc. This information is of the nature of privileged personal information of the alumni. The initial data is typically compiled by migrating the student admission data to the alumni database after the graduation of the student. The data is then periodically updated to keep it up to date. Institutional level database should be mandatorily maintained by institutions, with stringent privacy, and security measures of data.

The alumni database contains highly personal and sensitive information. This information has high commercial value and, if obtained by unauthorised entities, it can also be easily used for identity theft. While the above is true for student and alumni data even now, the systematic compilation of this data under the proposed initiative will make the database an attractive target from these considerations. Internationally, the universities typically take great care to ensure confidentiality of the information. Many universities maintain this information with highest level of confidentiality and regularly engage services of security professionals to audit their database systems and ensure that the confidentiality is maintained. The legal implications of the need for confidentiality must be communicated to HEIs. Besides that, the various mechanism available to achieve this must also be communicated. The UGC may also consider suggesting data policies covering various aspects of collection, maintenance and use of student and alumni data by universities and their affiliated colleges. Others often use professional alumni database management platforms that can provide them with the required functionality with high security. The access to database is high restricted with full history-saving and post-access audit trail. Access is typically provided only after entering into suitable non-disclosure agreement.

The database is also used for communications with the alumni. Various mailing lists based on relevant criteria can be created from the database so that targeted communications can be sent to the alumni. The database is also used to identify alumni who can be invited to contribute to

various activities. Creating and maintaining updated alumni database is a prime responsibility of the alumni-engagement unit of the university.

Priorities for Action

In India, alumni relations by universities are at the stage of infancy. There is inadequate understanding of the important role that alumni can perform as an important stakeholder of a university. The mechanisms for alumni engagement and fundraising are also not adequately developed in most universities. It is therefore important that the initial steps that are taken by universities and colleges are suitably supported by the UGC. It is recommended that public funding of seed money of approximately Rs.25 lakh may be provided to eligible institutions, to establish and maintain an active alumni-relations wing, including its alumni association. For devising criterion for selecting institutions for financial assistance the following may be taken into account.

- Only NAAC accredited multi-faculty HEIs with ‘A’ Grade or in top NIRF ranking
- Years of Existence
- Minimum number of alumni activities carried out in previous years
- Number of students in college /university
- Whether university /colleges have information of last 5 years of alumni
- Emerging institutions with best ranking

Any university or college is to compile the database of their alumni, and use this information for establishing communications with them. The IT infrastructure for the management of alumni data will be required by all universities interested in alumni relations. The IT infrastructure for different universities will need to have common structure and features. In order to avoid repetition and reduce the effort, the IT platform for the database and electronic communications may be set up by the UGC. Access to the IT platform can be provided to the interested universities on Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) basis.

Committee recommended that UGC may take following action :

- To consider suggesting data policies covering various aspects of collection, maintenance and use of student and alumni data by universities and their affiliated colleges. Various safeguards may be placed so that the sanctity of the alumni database is maintained by various users. A centralise database platform may be developed for the use by the universities and their affiliated colleges. In the meantime, the universities can develop their databases that can easily be migrated with the central platform later.
- A suitable cell may be established to sensitise the universities and help coordinate their activities. The cell can initially hand-hold the universities to establish their alumni database, initiate communications with the alumni, conduct programs such as Alumni Day, set up alumni recognition or awards, etc.
- Regional workshops to sensitize Higher Education Institutions and its stakeholders the importance of establishing Alumni Association may be organized.