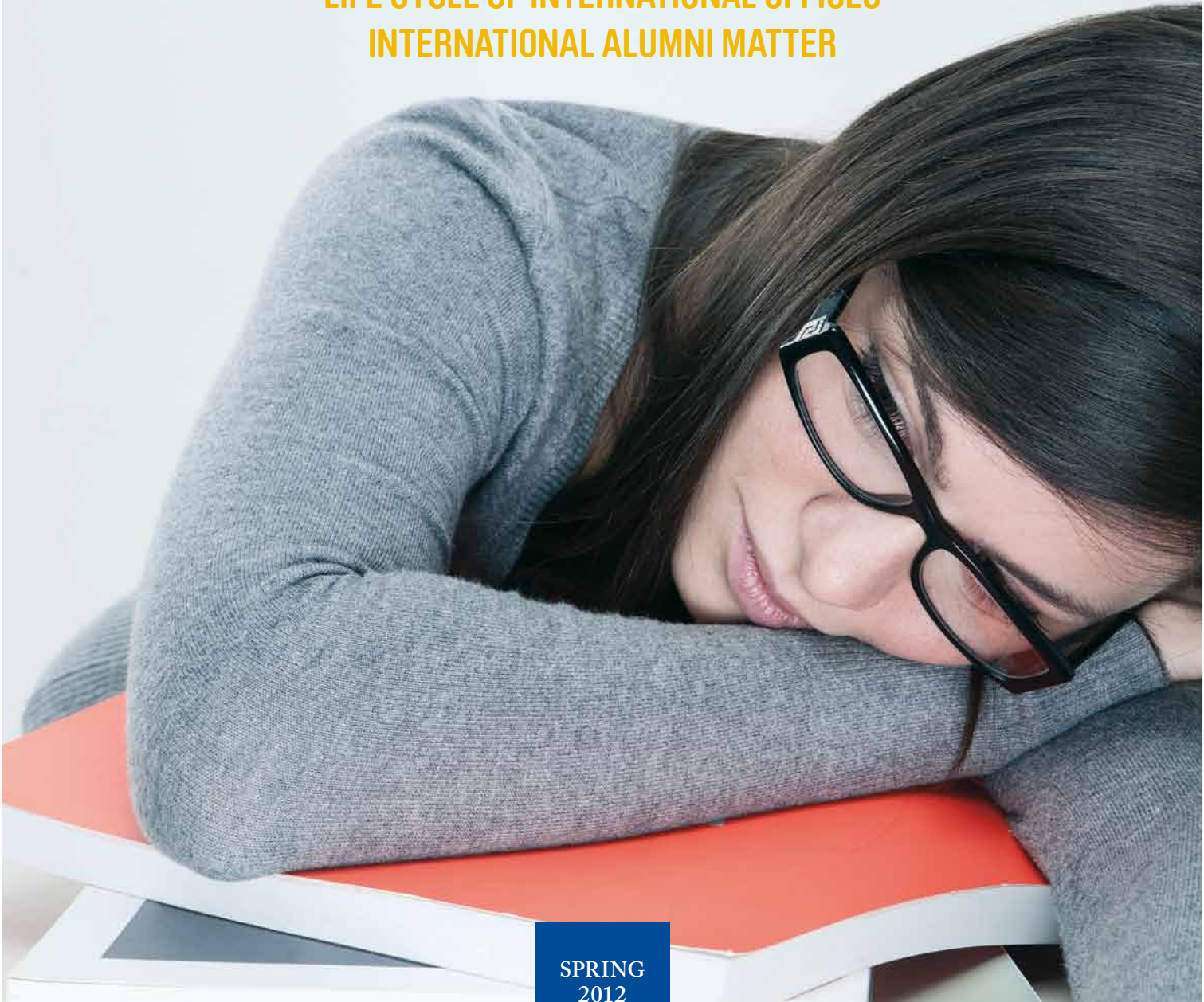


# FORUM

*Discussing international education*

**WHERE IS STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH GOING?**  
**AFRICA: A NEW DAWN OF INTERNATIONALISATION**  
**LIFE CYCLE OF INTERNATIONAL OFFICES**  
**INTERNATIONAL ALUMNI MATTER**





# INTERNATIONAL ALUMNI MATTER

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*The interest in developing strong ties with international alumni has increased over the years as universities continue to embrace all aspects of internationalisation. **Philip Conroy and Sandra Rincon** discuss the benefits of strengthening international alumni relationships and provide proven advice for effectively engaging with alumni abroad.*



Photo: Oleg Prikhodko (istock)

**W**ith the increase of international student enrolment, universities are expanding their alumni relations efforts to include their alumni abroad. The recruitment of students from around the world – which is driven by both cultural and economic factors, often to supplement the shrinking domestic student population – is a main motivator for this new focus on alumni relations. As is the growing realisation that international alumni are an important source of word of mouth advertising for university programmes.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF ALUMNI

The success of international alumni in their careers contributes to the development and expansion of the university's reputation, which in turn influences the university's rankings. The changing financial landscape within higher education, not only in Europe but around the world, is causing traditionally government-supported colleges and universities to seek new sources of funding. Successful and loyal alumni are one of those new sources, and they represent a community that is just too influential to ignore.

#### ALUMNI REPRESENT THE FULFILMENT OF MOST INSTITUTIONAL MISSIONS

Whatever the practical reason for developing an alumni relations programme, alumni represent the fulfilment of most institutional missions. Alumni personify the university. The alumnus selected the university and chose to graduate with a specific degree programme offered by that university. Simply put, alumni

matter to the institution and the success of alumni contributes to the reputation and prestige of the university.

#### COMMUNICATING WITH ALUMNI

How well a university shows its alumni how much they matter to the university determines the degree of connectedness to the institution. Alumni view the relationship with the university as a bi-lateral relationship: the relationship is between two people. Whomever the alumnus is speaking with from the university, *is* the university. Therefore, it is important that faculty and staff of the university realise that the alumnus views everyone from the university as speaking with one authoritative voice.

#### THE SUCCESS OF ALUMNI CONTRIBUTES TO THE REPUTATION AND PRESTIGE OF THE UNIVERSITY

In the case of international alumni, that institutional voice often comes from the international office, and consequently the international programme officer also becomes the international alumni relations officer.

#### ALUMNI RELATIONS PROGRAMME MODELS

There are several models of alumni relations programmes. Typical North American programmes are based on strong philanthropy principles. These programmes are centralised in the institution's alumni relations office. In comparison, many emerging European programmes distribute the responsibility for alumni relations throughout the university and tend to focus on career services. However, as the financial landscape for higher education changes

across the European Union, the desire to raise funds from alumni is also changing and is spreading across the continent.

The hallmark of an effective alumni relations programme is developing a two-way relationship, with the university communicating with the alumni and the alumni responding to the university. Serge Sych, Director of Alumni and Corporate Relations at Central European University in Budapest, Hungary, uses the analogy of a newly manufactured automobile to describe an integrated alumni relations programme: the body and engine of the car are the main programmes and structure of the university. The wheels

and the axis form the institutional support axes. These institutional support axes connect the four 'wheels' of an alumni relations programme. The four wheels are: communication and networking (staying in touch); services and benefits (staying relevant); volunteer opportunities (ways to get involved); and philanthropy (ways to support).

#### COMMUNICATION AND NETWORKING

Keeping connected to alumni, especially those who live outside the institution's home country, requires strategy and creativity. Remember, the alumnus views the relationship with the university as being bi-lateral and whoever is delivering the message represents the university. The alumni relations officer's message should be integrated and



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**PERHAPS THE GREATEST BENEFIT TO INTERNATIONAL  
ALUMNI IS THE CONTINUED DEVELOPMENT OF THE  
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consistent with the messaging of the institution.

Effective communication with alumni also requires two-way communication based on active listening. *How* alumni want to be communicated to is just as important as *what* is being communicated. A well thought out social networking strategy can be a cost effective and responsive way of developing alumni relations around the globe.

In order to develop effective communication and network strategies, use data to make sound decisions. A database programme is essential to collect and maintain alumni information. Most web-based programmes and social media sites also facilitate tracking the analytics of your communications. Surveying alumni around the globe can easily be done using tools such as *Survey Monkey*. But beware of sending out surveys too often. Consider carefully what type of information is needed; how will it be used; and how alumni will be informed of how their input made a difference.

#### **SERVICES AND BENEFITS**

Many alumni relations programmes also offer services and benefits to enhance the programme. Services such as access to the library and fitness centre are often offered to alumni who reside close to the university campus. Some alumni programmes, especially those in North America, offer credit card, insurance, and travel discounts as a service and source of revenue. Services such as these are difficult to offer to international alumni. Perhaps the greatest benefit to international alumni then is the continued development of the

institution's reputation and therefore the increasing prestige of the alumnus' degree. Another important benefit is the network of other alumni in their home country, where an alumni association can play an important role in engaging alumni and keeping them connected to their *alma mater*.

#### **ALUMNI VOLUNTEERING**

Among the greatest contributions that an alumnus can make to their *alma mater* is the gift of time. Volunteering offers many benefits. Alumni can assist with organising events, leading networks of alumni, assisting in recruiting new students, and mentoring students and new alumni in career development. Universities should remember that an effective volunteer programme also requires a strong stewardship programme, so they must be prepared to dedicate resources accordingly.

#### **PHILANTHROPIC SUPPORT**

The culminating activity for many alumni relations programmes is the willingness of alumni to contribute financially to the university. The philanthropic support for higher education institutions is developing around the globe. Philanthropic support demands a large investment in developing the relationship with alumni: alumni need to be cultivated over the years to financially support the institution.

#### **LAST WORD**

The advancement of colleges and universities is a well-developed professional effort in many countries with professional specialists in alumni relations, communications, and fundraising.

These programmes are part of the university's strategy and support the university's mission. Successful international alumni programmes need the support of institutional leadership and need to be incorporated into university strategies and missions. Once the importance of connecting with the international alumni has been established, institutions should choose a model that works for them. Many times, this will require close collaboration among the international office, the alumni office, marketing and recruitment office, career services and student services. Then, a communication plan needs to be developed that will meet the needs of the alumni and keep them connected to the institution. One of the best contributions alumni can make to their *alma mater* is giving their time. An alumni chapter or association, especially for those living abroad, encourages alumni engagement and provides a place where they can volunteer. Whichever methods institutions choose to engage their alumni, they must always let them know how much they matter. **E**

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The EAIE Special Interest Group *International Alumni Relations* (INTAL) offers a platform for all those involved in alumni programme development. Over the years it has offered comprehensive training courses on Alumni Relations A to Z and a series of workshops and concurrent sessions at the annual conference. For further information about INTAL, please visit [www.eaie.org/INTAL](http://www.eaie.org/INTAL).

The upcoming EAIE Conference in September will feature the session: Alumni relations programmes: navigating the risks – a must for anyone involved in alumni programme development. Look out for the session when the conference programme goes live in May.

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