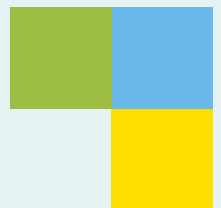


Creating Effective Alumni Engagement in VET

*Guidelines for VET professionals with
an ambition to work on alumni
engagement*



Co-funded by
the European Union

CINOP

SAMiEDU



Published by
CINOP BV

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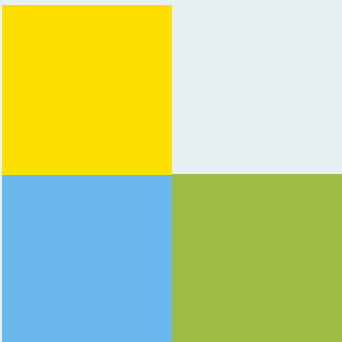
Disclaimer

This guide has been developed as part of the “Effective Alumni policies and practices in Finland and Netherlands: developing guidelines for VET schools” project, based on interviews, background research, and consultations with relevant stakeholders. Funded by the European Union. The European Union or the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) is not responsible for the content of this publication.



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Project information



Shortly about the project

These guidelines were produced as part of a KA210 VET Erasmus+ project *Effective Alumni Policies and Practices in Finland and the Netherlands: Developing guidelines for VET schools*, funded by the European Commission. The project was implemented in partnership by CINOP B.V., a Dutch social enterprise specialising in educational consultancy and research, and Vocational College Samiedu (Itä-Savon koulutuskuntayhtymä) in Finland. Together, CINOP and Samiedu examined the status of alumni policies and practices in vocational education and training (VET) at national, regional and institutional levels in the Netherlands and Finland. The cooperation between Finland and the Netherlands was based on the opportunity to learn from different stages of alumni engagement development.

The project focused on strengthening alumni engagement in VET by analysing existing policies, identifying effective practices, and developing concrete guidelines. Activities included desk research, transnational study visits, interviews with VET and higher education professionals, policymakers, and the creation of the following guidelines.

This publication is based on both desk research and interviews carried out in Finland and the Netherlands during transnational visits in September 2025 and January 2026. In total, ten professionals from seven organisations were interviewed in Finland, and seven professionals from six organisations in the Netherlands. The interviews explored needs, challenges, opportunities and best practices related to alumni policies and practices in VET, and where relevant, in higher education.

What these guidelines aim to do

What:

These guidelines support VET institutions in developing, strengthening and embedding alumni policies and practices. They translate research findings and practical experiences from Finland and the Netherlands into concrete guidelines for VET institutions at different stages of alumni policy development.

Why:

Interviews and desk research show that alumni engagement in VET is often fragmented, informal or dependent on individual initiatives. At the same time, alumni are increasingly important for education quality, labour-market alignment and lifelong learning. These guidelines respond to the need for a more strategic, sustainable and practice-oriented approach to alumni policies, that benefit VET schools, students, alumni and the labour market.

How:

The guidelines are designed to be flexible and accessible, regardless of an institution's starting point.

They:

- Help VET schools reflect on their current position (from no strategy to evolving strategy);
- Offer practical examples of alumni activities and strategic choices;
- Highlight the importance of combining bottom-up initiatives with top-down strategic support;
- Support step-by-step development rather than a one-size-fits-all model.

VET schools can use these guidelines as a starting point for discussion, decision-making and action, and adapt them to their own context, goals and capacity.



Who are alumni?

Alumni policies in vocational education and training (VET) are gaining increasing attention as institutions seek new ways to strengthen their relevance, quality and connections with the labour market. Alumni themselves play a crucial role in enhancing the quality, reputation and employability of educational institutions (Iskhakova et al., 2016).

While alumni engagement has long been recognised as a key strategic asset in higher education, its potential in VET remains less systematically developed and underutilised. At the same time, the changing demands of the labour market, the growing emphasis on lifelong learning, and the need for smoother transitions between education and employment highlight the importance of maintaining meaningful relationships with current and former students. At its best, alumni engagement builds bridges between different stakeholders: former students support current learners, working life connects with education, and institutions evolve together with their networks.

Who are alumni?

Alumni refers to any person who has attended and/or completed a course or programme at an educational institution. However, in the context of lifelong learning and professional development, this definition can be broadened to include individuals who have participated in formal, non-formal or short-term learning activities, such as upskilling or reskilling courses (McDearmon, 2013).



1

Alumni group



Characteristics



Contributions to the institution

Recent graduates

Alumni who have recently completed their programme

Supporting recruitment of prospective students and serving as near-peer mentors

Experienced professionals

Alumni with more extensive work experience

Offering professional expertise, providing curriculum feedback, supporting connections with the labour market through recruitment, placement and networking.

Alumni (overall)

Former learners of the institution

Enhancing VET education quality and maintaining ties with the regional labour market

Futrure alumni

Individuals currently enrolled in a programme

Building early connection and developing a foundation for future alumni engagement

¹ Alumni are not a static group; they range from recent graduates to experienced professionals (Rodriguez & Garcia, 2020).

Why Alumni Matter in VET

Why alumni matter and how can alumni benefit VET?

The positive impact of effective alumni policies and strong alumni relations is multifold. Not only do alumni play an important role for VET schools and their current students, effective alumni policies also benefit the labour market and alumni themselves (Rodriguez & Garcia, 2020). Based on the interviews and Desk Research, several benefits for VET schools, students, alumni and the labour market are identified.

Alumni contributions to VET schools

Alumni are regarded as key stakeholders for educational institutions, including VET schools. The support alumni provide to their former institutions can be divided into material and immaterial forms of support (Snijders et al., 2019; Iskhakova et al., 2017)

Type of contribution	Description
Material	Financial support such as donations, tuition fees when alumni return for further education, and membership fees for alumni associations
Immaterial	Voluntary contributions including curriculum feedback, labour-market connections, reputation enhancement, guest lectures, mentoring and networking

Benefits for student

For current students, alumni can serve as role models and mentors. Alumni help students gain insight into future career opportunities and demonstrate how an active relationship with the school can continue after graduation.

Effective alumni engagement can support students in several ways, including increasing motivation, improving labour-market preparation and strengthening students' sense of belonging to their school and professional community (Rodriguez & Garcia, 2020; Fung, 2022)

Type of contribution	Description
Motivation	Demonstrating the link between studies and career opportunities
Labour-market preparation	Guest lectures, networking events and insight into professional practice
Employability	Internship opportunities and professional experiences
Belonging	Strengthening identification with the VET institution and community
Internationalisation	Sharing international career experiences, supporting mobility pathways and connecting students with global alumni networks

Why Alumni Matter in VET

Benefits for alumni

Effective alumni policies are reciprocal: alumni support VET schools, while also benefiting in return. Through lifelong learning opportunities such as upskilling, reskilling and retraining, VET schools support alumni's ongoing professional development.

Research among Dutch VET alumni shows strong demand for coaching, networking and further learning, with many alumni expecting to retrain in the near future and seeing their former VET school as a key partner (Vugts et al., 2020). By developing strong alumni policies, VET schools can position themselves as central hubs for lifelong development and provide alumni with access to valuable professional networks and career opportunities (De Grip & Pleijers, 2019; De Grip, 2021).

Area	Benefit
Lifelong learning	Access to further education, upskilling and reskilling opportunities
Professional development	Coaching, retraining and continuous learning
Networking	Access to professional networks and career opportunities

Benefits for the labour market

The labour market is continuously changing, increasing the importance of lifelong learning, flexibility and opportunities for upskilling and retraining. VET schools play a central role in providing access to professional education at the regional level.

Alumni function as the "eyes and ears" of the labour market by providing feedback on changing skills demands and informing educational institutions about labour-market needs (Ebert et al., 2015). Through partnerships with VET schools, organisations gain access to highly trained workers and can create learning opportunities for their existing workforce. This is particularly relevant in regions and sectors facing labour-market shortages (CINOP, 2023).

Area	Benefit
Skills alignment	Feedback from alumni on labour-market demands
Workforce development	Upskilling and reskilling of current employees
Regional impact	Addressing skills shortages and supporting regional attachment and employment through collaboration with VET

Policy or Practice?



The difference and connection between alumni activities and alumni policy

An **alumni policy** refers to the strategies and activities used by educational institutions to build and maintain long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with their (former) students, providing lifelong value for both the institution and its alumni (Iskhakova et al., 2016). Alumni policies help ensure long-term commitment, provide a clear vision, and define a strategy for how an organisation aims to connect and engage with their alumni.

In the context of VET, such policies can support alumni in their professional development while simultaneously contributing to the improvement of educational quality (Gallo, 2018). As a result, a well-developed alumni policy plays a key role in promoting lifelong learning and strengthening the link between education and the labour market. It also creates a shared language which can be useful when trying to implement alumni activities across an organisation.

At the same time, **alumni activities** are the concrete actions organisations take to engage their alumni, such as events, newsletters or mentoring programmes. These activities bring policy to life in practice.

To achieve truly effective alumni engagement, both policy and activities are needed. Organisations may start from a **top-down approach**, by developing policy first, or from a **bottom-up approach**, by starting with activities. Neither approach is inherently right or wrong. However, it is important to recognise that policy and activities are interdependent: policy provides direction and coherence, while activities generate insights, engagement and energy. Together, they reinforce and strengthen each other over time.



Examples



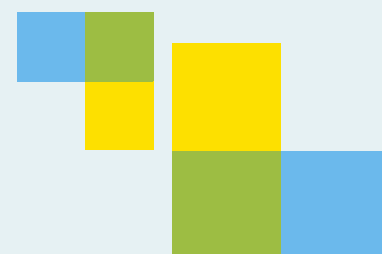
Alumni policy

- Strategic aims
- Vision
- Multi year budget
- Shared language



Alumni activities

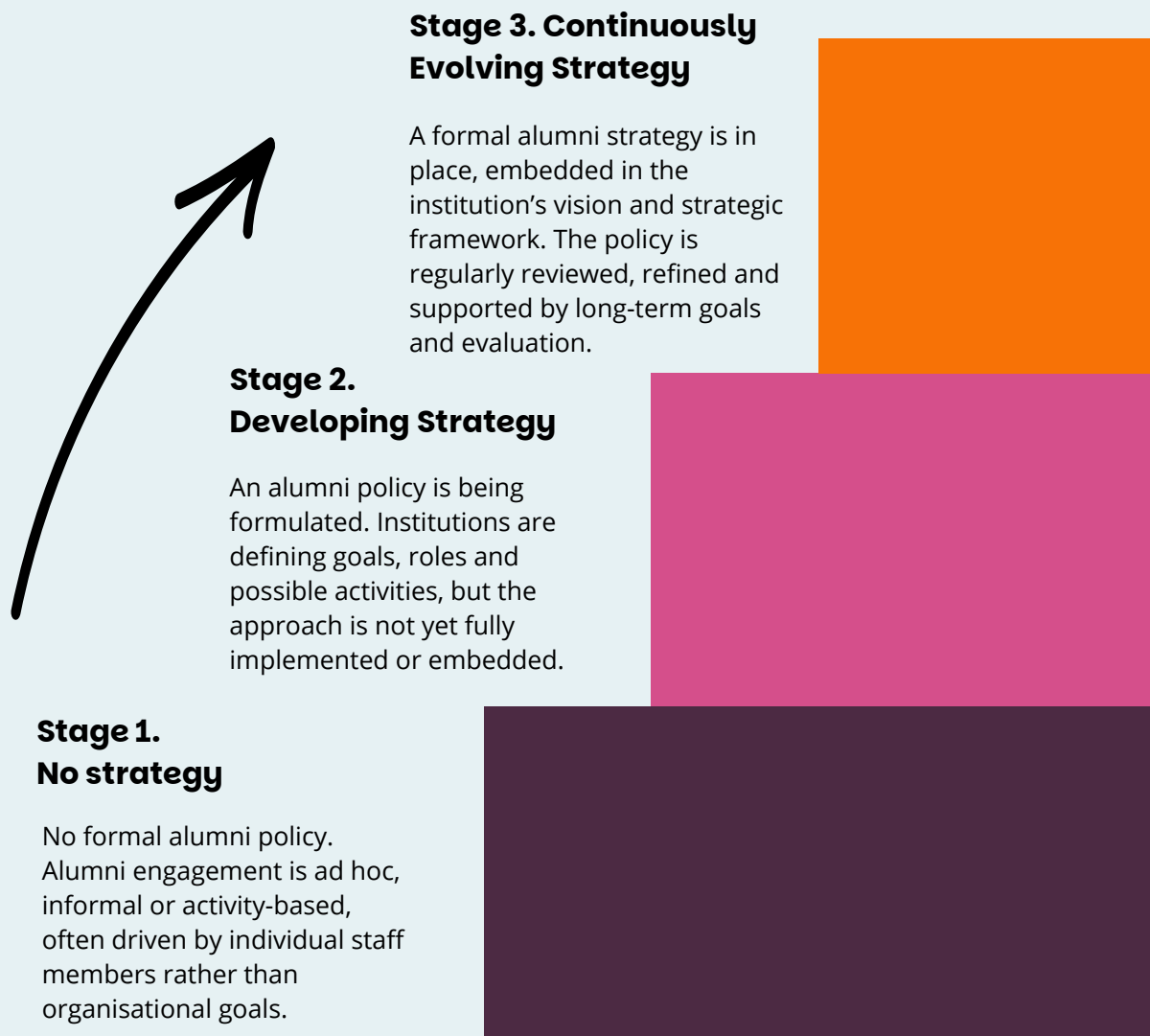
- Newsletters
- Platform
- Events
- Mentoring programmes
- Lifelong learning offers



Stages of Strategy

Different stages of development

The development of alumni policies in VET institutions varies widely and can be understood as a continuum of strategic maturity. Institutions are at different stages in embedding alumni engagement into their organisational strategy and daily practice. These can be divided into **three stages: no strategy, developing strategy, embedded & continuously evolving.**



What did we learn from the interviews?



Many VET institutions in Finland and the Netherlands are at different stages of alumni engagement. In Finland, alumni policies are just starting to flourish, with many schools beginning at stage 1. In the Netherlands, a focus on alumni has been present for a little longer, meaning that several schools are already at stage 2 or 3. Yet despite this, schools still face challenges with implementation.

The key lesson is that alumni engagement takes time and develops as a step-by-step progress. Having a policy does not automatically mean effective alumni engagement. The aim is to work towards **stage 3**, where alumni policy is supported by appropriate alumni activities — so it is not policy or activities, but policy **AND** activities.

Two Ways to Start

Top-down vs Bottom-up approach

As mentioned, there is no right or wrong way to start working on alumni engagement. Many schools decide to do this in a different way. Some start with small bottom-up initiatives, while others begin with setting up a policy and vision for alumni engagement that aligns with their school's vision and strategic aims.

Bottom-up

- Initiatives started by teachers, departments or project teams
- Often closely aligned with the needs of alumni and current students
- Flexible and practice-driven, but vulnerable to discontinuity if not embedded organisation-wide

Top-down

- Alumni policy embedded in the institution's formal strategy and vision
- Provides structure, continuity and legitimacy
- Requires commitment from leadership and management to support implementation

Dutch institution:

"We have no alumni policy. There is not too much attention for the alumni-topic, but you need someone in the school that is motivated and dedicated that make the management aware of the importance. I think that if you want to achieve something, you just need to start small and don't have to wait for a policy or strategy or whatever. Just go on, start from bottom-up. And not all alumni are the same, so you need to look all the time what triggers them to stay in touch?"



Building an Alumni Ecosystem

The importance of commitment: Alumni engagement ecosystem

Effective alumni engagement requires commitment across the organisation. Interviews showed that having a formal alumni policy does not automatically lead to effective implementation, especially when commitment from staff is lacking. Alumni initiatives often emerge bottom-up, but sustainable embedding requires top-down support and alignment.

Relationships/responsibilities and defining roles between:

Students

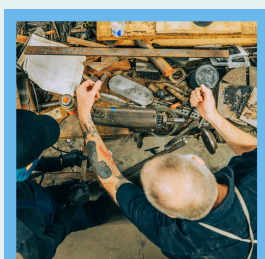
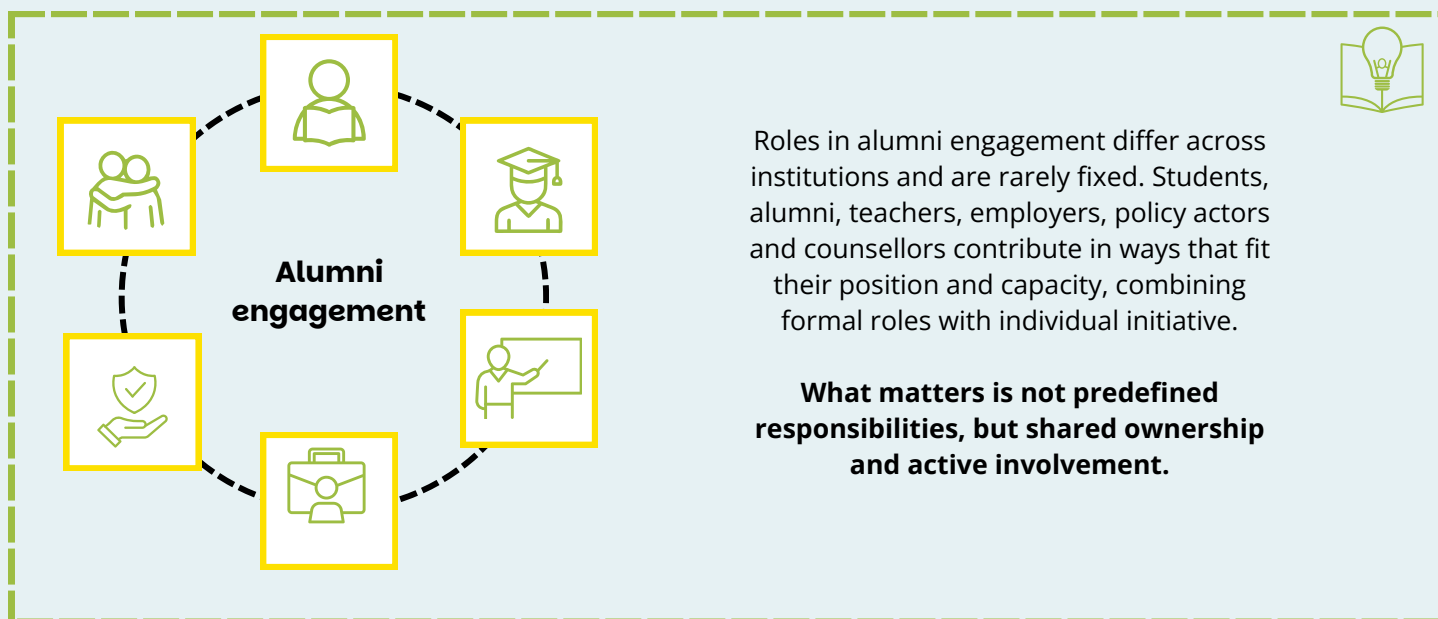
Alumni

Teachers

Employers
(region)

Policy actors

Counsellors



How to start

How to start Alumni engagement

Starting alumni engagement does not require major organisational restructuring; it can begin with small but well-planned steps. The foundation consists of defining the purpose of the work, assigning responsibility and selecting a communication channel.

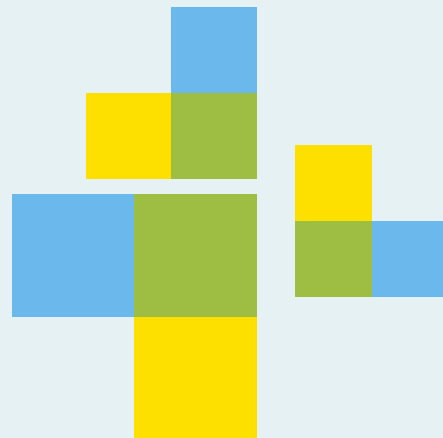
1 **The first step** is to clarify why the institution wishes to invest in alumni engagement and what benefits it aims to achieve. These may include tracking graduates' employment outcomes, strengthening labour market partnerships, enhancing institutional reputation or supporting transitions to further education. A clearly defined purpose makes the work more coherent and easier to justify both internally and externally. Clear purposes are also easier to measure and evaluate.

2 **The second step** is to assign responsibility. To ensure continuity, alumni engagement must not depend solely on individual enthusiasm. The institution should designate an alumni coordinator, a team or faculty-specific representatives. This prevents the work from collapsing in situations of staff turnover.

3 **The third step** is to determine how alumni will be contacted (after graduation). The institution must choose at least one viable communication or registration channel, such as an alumni platform, mailing list, social media community or messaging application. It is advisable to begin with a single channel and expand gradually as needed. Once these foundations are in place, the institution can implement its first practical actions—such as showcasing alumni stories to current students, inviting soon-to-graduate students to join an alumni network or organising a small alumni event. These early activities create visible progress and build momentum for future development.



***"Start with a clear vision and shared goals. What do you want as a school, but also as an academy.
Start small, and find people who are enthusiastic about alumni relations who can help with implementation.
Start with a couple good practices that can help provide examples and inspire."***



Tips on where to start

- Start small and take one step at a time
- Gather an enthusiastic group of colleagues who are willing to work on alumni activities with you
- Create commitment to ensure sustainability of activities and efforts
 - If starting from a top down approach ensure that you are taking along teachers, students and alumni to make sure that commitment is felt at all layers
 - If start with a bottom up approach, ensure that you work on gaining commitment from managers and the executive board.



Communication and Visibility

Effective communication is a cornerstone of successful alumni engagement, as it ensures that graduates and students alike understand the opportunities, benefits, and long-term values of maintaining a connection with the institution.

Communication is currently focused on different groups and occurs using various mediums. Most VET institutions approach students to join alumni networks at the moment of graduation or shortly after. This is a key moment for maintaining contact, especially when institutions no longer have access to personal contact details. Making alumni networks appealing and exclusive can increase participation.

Dutch Example

"The last 5 years we were busy with setting up the Alumni Networkclub. We have a website. All former students are welcome to join this club. When graduating we used to give the students a paper with 'do you want to keep in touch'? But it didn't work. We wanted to make it a special club, so that students want to connect to it. Now we invite them to join the special club and say 'You are the only people that can join this club'"



Finnish Example



***Graduation is not the end – It is the beginning of your next stage
Keudas Alumni Service Path***

The Alumni Service Path is a concise overview that brings together all the services offered to students at different stages of their studies - before graduation, at the point of graduation, and after entering working life as alumni. It makes visible the support, networking opportunities, and lifelong learning pathways available through Keuda. The service path has been co-created in collaboration with students, alumni, staff, and representatives of working life.

The Alumni Service Path ensures a smooth and visible transition from student to alumnus, helping graduates stay connected and continue benefiting from Keuda's services as they progress in their careers. It makes visible in one place the support Keuda provides for:

Career and Employment

Guidance, workshops, recruitment events, and digital tools that help students and alumni move smoothly into working life.

Further Studies

Information and counselling on additional qualifications, upskilling opportunities, and lifelong learning.

Entrepreneurship

Support for entrepreneurial skills, study modules, and qualification pathways related to starting a business.

Community and Networking

Alumni events, mentoring opportunities, peer networks, and activities that strengthen the ongoing connection to Keuda.

Learn more: [Keudaalumni activities — Keuda](#)

Early engagement

To keep students connected after graduation, alumni engagement should already start during their studies. VET professionals can support this by making alumni visible, relevant and easy to connect with.

Tips for visibility and engagement



- **Start from day one:** introduce alumni engagement early in the student journey
- **Choose relevant communication channels:** use channels students already know and access regularly
- **Explain what alumni are and why they matter:** make the purpose and benefits of alumni engagement clear
- **Define your target group:** be specific which students or alumni the activity is aimed at
- **Actively seek collaboration** with other education providers in your region to build stronger alumni networks and jointly develop initiatives.
- **Also target staff and labour-market partners in your communication:**
 - Staff commitment increases when they understand the value and relevance of alumni engagement within their programmes.
 - Employers should be reminded that they may themselves be alumni and that their participation strengthens institutional quality and graduate opportunities.

Finnish institution:

"You need to be visible as an institution at the beginning of the studies for the current student; they need to know what it means to be an alumnus and what it means in general. For example, you can invite alumni to tell their stories; they are proud and that works for the students. There is more chance that they will register themselves around graduation when they have heard of alumni before during the studies"

Examples for different communication channels

- Newsletters
- Websites
- Alumni events
- Info screens
- Alumni stories and articles
- Letters
- Social media
- Campaigns



What did we learn from the interviews?



In both Finland and the Netherlands, alumni engagement often targets graduates and students in the final phase of their studies. However, the interviews show that early engagement can strengthen students' sense of belonging and make alumni engagement more visible and meaningful before graduation.

In Finland, examples show that sharing alumni stories during the study period can help students see the value of vocational education and possible career pathways. In the Netherlands, some institutions already introduce alumni during open days, information sessions or before graduation.



Success factors and challenges

Success factors for alumni engagement

Factors

Commitment

- Visibility of alumni during studies (role models, stories etc.)
- Focus on faculty/programme level
- Clear benefits for alumni ("what's in it for them")
- Organisational support (ambassadors, staff engagement, board commitment)

Active networks & sharing best practices

- Participating in regional and national alumni networks
- Sharing practical experiences and best practices
- Using shares guidelines and tools
- Collaboration with working-life partners and regional actors

Starting with small steps

- Step-by-step development
- Starting without a formal policy
- Bottom-up or top-down entry points
- Alumni register as a foundation

What do others say?

"It's a good start for the student journey during their study and for feeling more connected to the study and the academy, which makes it more likely that they are involved after graduation as well."

"We started with making strategic plans and vision on alumni; and get approval of our board. Every year we set new goals for our alumni policy and activities. We stick to the goals and have to defend/tell what we do. It is called a 'work agenda', we get government money for this, and alumni is a big target group."

"The network is useful. We can share information without any worry for competition. We don't compete because we have different alumni"



Success factors and challenges

Challenges

Factors

Lack of awareness and visibility with students and alumni

- Students do not understand or relate to the term “alumni”
- Low visibility of alumni activities during studies

Lack of visibility and commitment among staff

- Reliance on motivated individuals such as ambassadors
- Limited involvement of staff in organising alumni activities
- Differences in engagement depending on faculty leadership and priorities

Lack of resources

- Limited time and budget for alumni activities
- Alumni work combined with other responsibilities (in Finland)
- Lack of clear coordination and ownership
- Project-based and or temporarily funded, limiting long-term sustainability

Monitoring

- No systematic way to track alumni contributions, making it difficult to demonstrate the value internal and external
- No dedicated CRM system

What do others say?

“It is difficult to make alumni activities visible to current students. Current students don’t really know what alumni means.”

“The term “alumni” is difficult especially for young people; young people do not relate to it. It is hard for them to understand what the term alumni means.”

“It remains a challenge. It’s ideal to have an ambassador per academy, but it’s very dependent on the director of the academy. Some see the need more than others.”



Reflection questions



Do you have a clear vision on alumni?



Why does your organisation want to connect with alumni? What are your primary aims?



Do you have an alumni policy or strategy?



At which stage of development is your organisation (no strategy / under development / established)?



How do you define alumni?



When do you start engaging students as future alumni?



Is there a continuous approach to developing alumni activities?



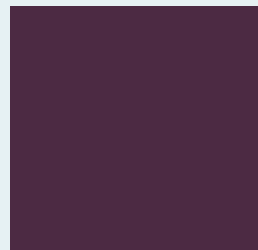
Are sufficient resources allocated (time, budget)?



**Is there a clear and consistent use of communication channels?
Is communication planned and regular?**



Is alumni cooperation integrated into your lifelong learning approach and are its benefits visible to students and staff?



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Co-funded by
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