

Alumni Rendezvous: An Instrument of Building Network & Relationship

Vinita Katiyar^{1*} and Amit Kumar Jain²

¹Regional Services Division, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi, India

²IGNOU, Regional Centre Karnal, Haryana, India

*Corresponding author: vinita.katiyar@ignou.ac.in

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ABSTRACT

Engaging alumni has become a key institutional objective, particularly in higher education. Universities are active in developing strategies for engaging with their alumni as an architect in construction of the institutional brand. Despite the fact that alumni usually leave college to seek employment, they can keep in touch and grow their global professional network. Involving alumni in every activity of the institution's functioning is vital to maintain a strong sense of affiliation. Establishing meaningful relationships with alumni is also important to the sustainable growth and development of higher education programs. Proud alums often act as influential marketing ambassadors for their organization and give positive testimonials about their time there. Alumni cherish the memories whenever they have an opportunity to visit their place of education due to their sentiments. Nevertheless, Institutions may face difficulties in their pursuit of this goal. Smart technology can be used by institutional leaders to create memorable experiences that will strengthen ties between the university and alumni. Encouraging alumni to other graduates and advanced learning opportunities offered at the higher education institution not only encourages alumni to re-enroll but also reinforces the value of their degree. The article elucidates the characteristics, role, and importance of alumni. Also, the challenges faced by institutions in connecting and reunion of alumni have been explicated.

Keywords: Alumni, Alumni Association, Higher Education, IGNOU

Alumni are an important factor in the success of higher education. They are essential component of higher education's success. (Newman and Petrosko, 2011). They are key stakeholders and important contributors to the growth and development of their alma mater. There is a strong correlation between stakeholder participation and educational quality. (Veluvali and Suriseti, 2023). Alumni engagement is therefore acknowledged as a crucial element in evaluating the institution's excellence by accreditation and quality evaluation criteria (NAAC 2017 Revised Accreditation Framework (RAF).pdf).

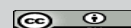
An inclusive environment that promotes experience sharing and knowledge sharing is a result of the institution and its alumni working together. It also helps to bridge the gap between academia and

industry. This, in turn, guarantees that educational quality is in line with industry demands.

Alumni engagement has received growing attention in entrepreneurship research as a potent resource that supports the third mission of universities by energizing knowledge-intensive entrepreneurship and fostering technology transfer (Baroncelli *et al.* 2022; Belitski & Heron, 2017). Entrepreneurship graduates play a critical and catalytic role in university-based entrepreneurship ecosystems (Hayter, 2016; Lubynsky, 2012). A steady engagement

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with alumni is important for the strategic growth of higher education institutions (Chase, 2019). Studies have documented that alumni with a stronger sense of belonging to their alma mater are more likely to give back to their alma mater (Drezner *et al.* 2020).

The strategic growth of higher education institutions depends on maintaining a consistent relationship with their alumni. They deliver lectures, help existing students in finding find employment, recruit new students, serve as mentors, contribute funding for the institution and many more. In this way they serve as ambassadors of the institutions (Weerts *et al.* 2010). Due to this, the institutions are exploring innovative and effective avenues for alumni engagement going much beyond the conventional routes, envisaged best practices for dissemination and knowledge sharing (Rawski, 2011). However, it has been realised that there is lack of empirical database regarding alumni networks (Rohlmann and Wompener 2009).

History of Alumni

The word “alumnus” has Latin origins. Alumnus literally translates to “fellow,” “companion,” or “pupil.” It was once applied to church-based educational institutions. (Niebergall, 2007). “Alumni” are graduates of an educational institution who represent an important part of academic life and the community. The term is not synonymous with “graduates”: people can be alumni without graduating, e.g. Burt Reynolds was an alumnus of Florida State University but did not graduate. The term is not only used for Graduates of higher educational institutions, but also it is associated with former employees, former members of an organization, former contributors, or former inmates. History shows that alumni networks are about 200 years old and were fixed at the first graduates’ meeting in Yale. Primary American universities formed the term alumni in the sense of how it is used today (David and Coenen 2014).

Objectives of the Study

Alumni are known as heart of every academic institution who stand for the institution’s continuous growth and development. They contribute significantly to shaping the cultural and academic landscape for the institution. Keeping in view of this, the article has been intended —

- ❑ to assess the multi-faceted world of alumni;
- ❑ to elucidate the goal and function of alumni associations;
- ❑ to throw light vision of UGC on alumni in line of NEP-2020;
- ❑ to exemplify the alumni association of the IGNOU.

The emphasis has also been given to appraise strength of alumni in building educational excellence, challenges alumni engagement and to propose constructive ways for inclusiveness of alumni in educational system accordingly.

Methodology

This study used exploratory secondary data that was made available from several sources. Since the article is purely based on the information cited in the literature and research papers. The material used in this study has been obtained from information reported in various articles, research papers, magazines, and documents. Contents have also been borrowed from the Web-based open-source resources including Institute news and blogs. Accordingly, a systematic review of literature and publications has been carried. VC report and Annual report of IGNOU have also been referred to get the data of IGNOU pass outs students.

Data from a variety of reliable sources including websites, blogs, research papers, manuals, and magazines, has been examined and analyzed to assess the objective of articles. Some numerical information about the alumni in context of IGNOU has also been given in the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The literature review and studies have been organized in a way that aligns with the objectives of the study. Accordingly, the data has been analyzed for Alumni Associations, Multifaceted World, vision of Government and apex bodies in encouraging Alumni association, alumni of IGNOU and the issues encounter in engaging the Alumni.

Multifaceted World of Alumni and their association

Alumni associations are organized groups that represent and promote the interests and commitment of former students of an educational institution.

They play a crucial role in shaping an active and supportive alumni community. Alumni networks are the platforms for career development, personal growth and a lasting connection with the institution.

- ❑ **Amplify Professional opportunities:** A platform to lead a professional and social networking. Alumni networks provide access to a wide range of career opportunities, valuable contacts which may prosper the career, including job offers, business opportunities and professional partnerships.
- ❑ **Offers Mentoring and Support:** Alumni networks have mentoring programs that allow experienced alumni to share their knowledge and experience with current students or younger alumni, which is valuable for their development.
- ❑ **Promote Lifelong learning:** It offers continuing education programs, workshops and seminars to provide members with opportunities for personal and professional growth.
- ❑ **Enhance Philanthropic initiatives:** Alumni associations often initiate and support philanthropic projects that benefit both the educational institution and the broader community. In this way, they pay back to their institutions through donations, volunteering, or participating in initiatives that support current students.
- ❑ **Building Advocacy and Reputation:** Alumni can act as ambassadors for their institution, enhancing its reputation and advocating for its interests in various forums.

Thus, alumni engagement is a multifaceted approach where former students actively contribute to their alma mater's growth.

Activities of Alumni Associations

Alumni associations are strong pillar of alumni work and make a significant contribution to creating a lively, committed and supportive community that lasts beyond their time at the university. Alumni associations serve several important functions that benefit both the alumni and the institution. Some key functions are given here:

- ❑ **Regular Communication:** Alumni associations regularly informed about the institution's

developments through newsletters, social media, and other communication channels helps maintain a strong connection.

- ❑ **Alumni Events:** Alumni associations regularly organize events such as annual meetings, networking events, lecture series and cultural activities that promote cohesion and exchange among members.
- ❑ **Mentorship and Career Support:** Alumni associations often facilitate mentorship programs where experienced alumni guide current students and recent graduates, providing career advice and support.
- ❑ **Alumni Chapters:** Alumni associations establish regional or international chapters, those helps alumni stay connected regardless of their location, fostering a global network.
- ❑ **Database Management:** Alumni associations maintain an up-to-date database of alumni, helps in tracking their achievements and keeping them engaged with the institution.

Alumni Engagement in Higher Education – Vision of UGC

University alumni engagement programs are thought to be the most effective in the world. These experiences have led to the development of several significant best practices that promote interaction between alumni and their alma mater and have worldwide applicability. 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 endeavors etc. In keeping with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, India's University Grants Commission (UGC) has taken important initiatives to strengthen alumni engagement in the constantly changing field of higher education.

- ❑ As the apex regulatory body for higher education in India, the UGC recognizes the 'Student Career Progression and Alumni Network' as pivotal for quality improvement in higher education.
- ❑ The UGC aims to enhance student career progression and establish lasting connections

between students and institutions, acknowledging the era of student-centric learning. The UGC has proposed alumni networks 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.

- ❑ As a large number of alumni are settled outside the country. 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.
- ❑ In alignment with NEP-2020, the UGC urges universities to prioritize Alumni Engagement. The directive encourages the establishment of dedicated alumni-relations wings and formal associations. Additionally, the UGC recommends creating a comprehensive alumni database.

Vision of Prime Minister, Government of India

Prime Minister Narendra Modi also urged educational institutions to adopt innovative methods and develop creative platforms for engagement with alumni. The Prime Minister said that a strong vibrant and active alumni network is needed not only in big Colleges and Universities but also in schools of our villages. The Prime Minister said that IITians have provided their institutions' many facilities like Conference Centres, Management Centres & Incubation Centres set up by their efforts. All of these endeavors improve the learning experience of current students. IIT Delhi has initiated an endowment fund, which is a brilliant idea. There is a culture of such endowments in renowned universities across the world, which helps the students. News : IIT Delhi

Alumni Association of IGNOU (AAI)

In the last 35 years of its existence, IGNOU has

made significant contributions in democratizing higher education in the country by extending educational opportunities to all segments of the society. So far about 34 lakh students have received their degree/diploma/certificate from IGNOU. That makes it the single largest alumni network in the world. The Alumni Association of IGNOU (AAI) aims to provides a common platform to the IGNOU Alumni, facilitates communication and sharing of experience with following objectives:

- ❑ To foster close relationship between IGNOU Alumni and the University;
- ❑ To provide opportunities for community service and to act as goodwill ambassadors of IGNOU within India and abroad;
- ❑ To provide academic and professional interaction and networking among IGNOU Alumni and endeavor to create career opportunities for the IGNOU student community;
- ❑ To accept funds in the form of gift, donation, subscription, etc. and utilize the same for achieving objectives of the Association;
- ❑ To uphold the democratic and inclusive traditions of IGNOU and to strive for their furtherance, through all the activities of the Association, including the organization of Annual and periodic Lectures / Seminars / Symposia, etc. centered around themes that deepen the understanding and appreciation of the values enshrined in the Preamble of the University (IGNOU) ;
- ❑ To promote learning and innovation in the fields of science, literature, education, social science, liberal arts, fine arts and other systemic area of ODL & Online learning;
- ❑ To realize the enormous benefits that may come from the engagement of IGNOU Alumni with the University;
- ❑ To serve as effective interlocutors in upholding the cause of peace and disarmament and in promoting friendship and co-operation between peoples and nations across the world and in providing appropriate material and intellectual support to the University, particularly in locating and augmenting its frontline systemic research in ODL;

- ❑ To organize socio-cultural events and interactions between Alumni and their family members;
- ❑ To honor the distinguished Alumni of IGNOU, who have excelled and contributed in their respective domains;
- ❑ To have “Chapters of the Association” within India at different Regional Centers of IGNOU established by the University and outside India for furtherance of the objectives of the Association. Based on the data extracted from the past six convocations of the IGNOU (32nd to 37th Convocation from 2019 to 2024), a remarkable number of students successfully completed their respective programs (Fig. 1). Table 1 depicts the program-level-wise break-up of pass-out students. This indicates that the alumni pool has significantly grown over the last couple of years.

Table 1: Programme level wise number of pass-out during past six convocations

Level of Programme	Total Passed out	Level wise % of passed out
Ph. D	371	0.022
M.Phil.	47	0.003
Master	603145	35.591
Bachelor	591618	34.911
Diploma	262055	15.464
Certificate	92427	14.010
Total	1694663	100.00

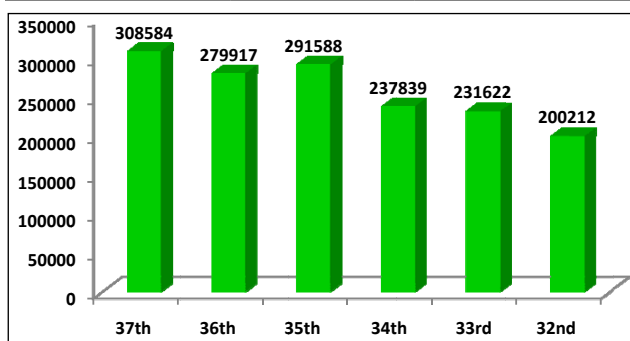


Fig. 1: Number of Pass out students during past six convocations

Institute Development Plan (IDP) of IGNOU 2023 has placed a strong emphasis on the value of alumni relationships for institutional growth. The IGNOU has created an alumni registration dynamic portal in accordance with these requirements. Furthermore,

the University has organized more than fifty alumni meetings across the nation in 2021–2022 in coordination with schools and regional centers on digital platform (IGNOU -RSD Activity Profile 2024).

SIT - Challenges in Alumni Engagement

Alumni engagement approaches vary from institution to institution. The use of technology in alumni engagement has made much simpler, but it hasn't been able to completely eliminate some of the frequent challenges. What are the Challenges in Alumni Engagement? – Vaave Blog. These challenges can be clubbed into three buckets as (a) strategic (b) interactive, and (c) technological.

Strategic

In terms of the strategic challenges faced by alumni engagement, there are three broad issues that emerge. These are *defining alumni*, *Under-pressure budgets*, *Lack of cohesiveness*.

Interactive

There are three key challenges that alumni engagement faces when it comes to the interactions between alumni and the institution. These are *One-sided interactions*, *Impersonal interactions*, *non-value adding interactions*.

Technological

There are two major facets of technology that pose challenges to alumni interactions - *Legal and infrastructural challenges* and *Inefficient and outdated technology*.

Since institutions and universities have different approaches to engaging alumni, so do the difficulties that they encounter. The difficulties can be divided into three categories for understanding: strategic, interactive, and technological. The main challenges, on the surface, is that the majority of institutions do not consider alumni involvement to be a strategic endeavor. As a result, institutions frequently lose out on using alumni to their full potential. Most institutions do not see alumni engagement as a strategic initiative. Due to this, institutions often miss out on leveraging alumni in the truest sense. Begin your outreach to alumni by using soft and gentle communication that links them to your institution without asking for a major commitment.

Additionally, provide sufficient opportunities for alumni to stay in touch with you, such as social media platforms, newsletters, and events, in order to keep them updated on the institution's successes. There is a need to made data driven culture at the institutional levels.

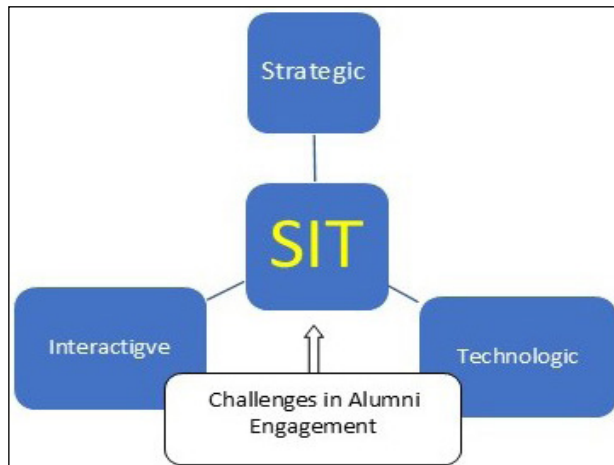


Fig. 2: Challenges in Alumni Engagement

Another important domain of the challenge is in the form of outdated technology and data. With approximately 50% of the email addresses on the record being undeliverable, many institutions are unable to extract meaningful information from their alumni database beyond basic contact and

graduating class details. As a result, universities are forced to invest their scarce marketing resources in generic mail and email campaigns that often fail to generate any returns. These generic campaigns typically lead to an increase in opt-outs and unsubscribed, with no benefit to the university.

Model for alumni engagement

El-Awad *et al.* (2022) proposed a model for the possible engagement alumni graduated with entrepreneur skills. According to this model there are three forms of alumni engagement viz. Explorative, Instrumental and Emotional (Table 2). Considering the elements of El-Awad's model, alumni engagement might be planned to make use of IGNOU's alumni resources. Alumni of IGNOU have come out of –

- ☐ Heterogenous
- ☐ Matures
- ☐ Self-motivated
- ☐ Working community.
- ☐ Rarely meet and interact with peers.

According to elements of El-Awad's model, the pool of alumni of IGNOU may be utilised in following way –

Table 2: Three forms of alumni engagement (El-Awad *et al.* (2022))

	Explorative alumni engagement	Instrumental alumni engagement	Emotional alumni engagement
Component	Cognition	Conation	Affection
Characteristic feature	Sense-making processes	Strategic goal-oriented action	Feelings of commitment and belongingness
Giving and taking behaviors	<i>Giving</i> – sharing experiences and business insights <i>Taking</i> – gathering information about unknown ecosystem domains	<i>Giving</i> – focusing resources on new business opportunities <i>Taking</i> - accessing scarce resources associated with opportunity development	<i>Giving</i> – providing inspiration and encouragement <i>Taking</i> - building and affirming identity and self-efficacy
Key drivers	Proactive search	Competence compatibility, Locational advantages	Reciprocity Social identification
Function in the ecosystem	Opening for entrepreneurial experimentation	Productive use of resources for entrepreneurial outcomes	Community building

Source: El-Awad, Z., Gabriellson, J., Pocek, J., & Politis, D. (2022). *Journal of Small Business Management*, 62(3), 1219–1252. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472778.2022.2125979>.

Particular	Explorative	Instrumental	Emotional
Acclimatization & Inclusion in ODL ecosystem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sensitization for Organisation ○ Self-realization for their role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Behavior within Organisation ○ Adoptability in system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sense of belongingness ○ Perceptions of dedication and commitment
Functional role in ODL ecosystem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Keep up conversations with the Institute and Alumni. ○ Opening for entrepreneurial experimentation & other professional avenues for other students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Using resources effectively to achieve entrepreneurial goals ○ A pool of suggestions and opinion of alumni for optimum utilisation of resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Building a network of alumni connected to different professions. ○ Active involvement of alumni in the process of the university as per their expertise.

CONCLUSION

The Alumni are truly a strong support to the institution. An active Alumni Association can contribute in academic matters, student support as well as mobilization of resources – both financial and non-financial. But to achieve this, firstly education in India must be detached from political influences and politicians. Secondly, alumni need to be convinced that their hard and earned money will not fall prey to corrupt practices and will be used wisely for betterment and growth.

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. Institutions are urged to establish an Alumni Connect Cell, a proactive initiative to engage with alumni. The “Alumni Connect” encourage to higher education institutions to actively engage with alumni of foreign origin and Indians living abroad. Institutions are advised to maintain a detailed database, and share information about the institution’s latest initiatives to maintain continuous engagement. Virtual connections, conferences, webinars, networking, get-togethers, and community service activities with alumni support are essential components of this initiative. The alma mater should strive for a two-way relationship with their alumni. To achieve this, alumni outreach should include professional and personal support such as professional networking events and career services, continuing education opportunities, and the use of campus facilities. Moreover, alumni should be connected through

reunions, directories, and technology. Additionally, alumni should be offered continuing education in their career fields or general learning opportunities such as speaking events and seminars. The UGC suggests sharing alumni details with the government whenever required, emphasizing collaboration for the greater good. System-generated emails/SMS may be sent at various times, creating a seamless communication channel between institutions, alumni, and government entities. Alumni Engagement, fortified by the innovative Alumni Connect Cell, stands at the forefront of the UGC’s initiatives. By implementing these strategies, institutions can enhance their academic quality and establish a global presence through continuous engagement with alumni, both at home and abroad. The UGC’s vision aligns seamlessly with NEP 2020, fostering a collaborative future in higher education.

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