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Student Travel Award Report: how can Alumni groups engage with students and recent graduates?

I used my Student Travel Award to travel this summer to Hamburg, Berlin, Frankfurt, Munich, Paris, Vienna and Kent. I had an amazing time, met some very interesting people along the way, and was really impressed by the diversity in Cambridge alumni groups and the different and successful ways in which they function. The main focus of my report is on how societies could change their events to attract a different alumni demographic, and how CUDAR could help to consolidate links between current students and Cambridge alumni.

Types of events

One of the problems with some societies is that their events do not always appeal to young people, and the society structure as a whole is not particularly inclusive of current students or recent graduates. Organised events seem to work well for groups with an older demographic, but younger members do not have as much time in the day and would perhaps prefer something a little less formal.

Alumni groups in the UK often serve a different purpose to those in Europe, because for Europeans these groups can be a way of consolidating your national feel when studying abroad and having some solidarity in knowing others from your country and who speak your language. Because the majority of people studying in Cambridge are British, it’s easier for Brits to keep in touch with their university contemporaries without an alumni society, which is why older alumni tend to use the British groups as a social circle rather than them being used by young professionals for networking. To some extent this pattern is inevitable, although there are still ways of making societies in the UK more attractive to younger members.

Informal pub-type meet-ups work well, because they are quite informal and appeal to a fairly large age range. This works because freshers want to come back to future Freshers’ events and similar pub-style meet-ups, as it is easy to make friends and network. If a society lacks this, it is much less likely to attract younger members. Some of the more recently founded groups such as the ones in Hamburg and Munich are less steeped in tradition and the idea of Cambridge, and their events are a bit less formal.

It could help to have a younger representative on the society committee who could organise more informal meet-ups in addition to the structured ones taking place in the day for retired members. Events could be run in two streams, so that retired society members can still continue their day trips and social events, but perhaps current students and recent graduates could have less formal evening meet-ups. Obviously it would also be ideal if the two streams were merged at some points.

Running regular events

The groups in Paris, Vienna and Kent all have a regular programme of social events that the members speak enthusiastically about. Even if these events have yet to be tailored to younger members and recent graduates, their existence speaks well for the society. In particular, the Austrian society runs an interesting programme of events such as a
theatre trip, a Christmas dinner and a Boat Race event at Easter. These events appeal to both younger and older members, especially because some of them take place in university holidays, allowing current students to also attend, as many did the Vienna Freshers’ event. Such a programme, well publicised and regular, ensures that the society is running actively and increases the probability of new members being attracted.

The group in Frankfurt does not put on events as such, with the result that it’s more of a mailing list than a group. This works because Frankfurt is a business city where young people often move to work and don’t have a lot of time for Cambridge alumni social events, but it is maybe worth making it clear on the CUDAR website that some groups are very active socially and some do not really have this element.

CUDAR could also help smaller and less-established alumni groups to organise their events by linking them up with any useful contacts. In Munich there was talk of organising a garden party, but the group leader was having trouble finding a venue, so maybe this is something CUDAR could help with. This would allow smaller groups to consolidate themselves and establish a regular programme of events, which would in turn attract more members.

**Helping societies to get in contact with freshers and current students**

The society in Munich remarked that they wanted to run a Fresher’s event, but had no way of finding out the names and contact details of the people starting at Cambridge this September, it being also unlikely that these new students would know about the alumni group before actually starting university. This is something that CUDAR could help with, as other societies in Germany seemed to be able to get into contact with freshers, so if possible such useful information should be passed on to all societies that need it. Setting up these relations before students start at Cambridge is helpful because it makes the alumni groups more of a social space for past and present students, rather than a club that you can only join upon completing your Cambridge degree.

**Email & Internet presence**

Before visiting Frankfurt, I sent out a short bio and request to meet up with an alumnus or two if they had the time, and received several lovely responses within a few days. This evidences that email lists work well, but since the group in Frankfurt is not very active and is essentially little more than this email list, other methods of communication are useful for a group that organises regular events and is actively looking to recruit new members.

Currently, the easiest way to contact alumni groups is via the group contact forms on the CUDAR page, which are a bit out-dated. It would be better to provide email addresses for the main contacts on the CUDAR website, and then wherever possible for groups to set up their own websites and Facebook pages in order to make themselves more easily found and to entice new members. Using Facebook would definitely attract younger members, and having a page in conjunction with a website and emailing list is the most effective way of ensuring that all age categories can access the society.
The German Cambridge Society has a very comprehensive website with information about the events they put on and sign-up reminders, which other societies could use as a model. Having a website also gives an impression of the society being organised and cohesive, which makes any alumnus more likely to want to become a member, especially if they do not have to search too hard to find information about events.

**Offering incentives to join**

The German Cambridge Society runs a scheme offering grants for approximately four Cambridge students a year to study at the Humboldt University in Berlin over the summer. This type of scheme creates direct links between current Cambridge students and the alumni network. The member of the society that I met was very keen on the idea of these alumni groups having a wider purpose and direction than just a Cambridge club for social events, which for larger societies is an impressive yet achievable goal. It would be great if this and other similar schemes were more widely publicised, which is something that CUDAR could perhaps help with.

It is also free to become a member of the Paris society if you are a current student at Cambridge, which is a good way of attracting younger members since they have nothing to lose. Obviously society members will see the benefits of the society once they are part of it, but especially for current students and recent graduates who probably have lots to fill their time, it’s important for an alumni group to make an attractive offer.

**Links with Cambridge student societies**

At the Austrian Welcome to Cambridge event, the president of the Cambridge Austrian Society gave a short speech with some tips for freshers about starting at Cambridge and the particular challenges of being an international student. This made the Austrian alumni group appear accessible to freshers, and the strong links between the two societies, as well as the many current Cambridge students who also attended the Welcome to Cambridge event, mean that new graduates smoothly and inevitably transition from one society to the other. This works well for the alumni network and makes the society a lot more inclusive.

Inviting current Cambridge students who have attended a Welcome to Cambridge event in the past few years works well because students about to start at Cambridge often have a lot of questions and like to be reassured. At the Hamburg, Paris and Austrian events, second and third year students were present, which gave the societies a more dynamic feel and provided a welcome link between freshers and less recent alumni.

**Sponsorship**

The Oxford and Cambridge Society of Austria has a sponsor company that financially supports their events in return for some company promotion at them. This means that the society is able to fund an extensive programme of events throughout the year, which other societies perhaps cannot do due to lack of funds. Perhaps CUDAR could encourage more such links between companies and societies. This may also make the societies more attractive to recent graduates who would be more likely to use them as a networking opportunity than as a social event.
Links between groups in one country

Where there is a country with a high population of Cambridge alumni, such as Germany, it works well for groups to interlink and communicate with each other. Some countries only have one main alumni group in the capital, and this can often exclude Cambridge alumni who don’t live anywhere near there, so it is encouraging to see how Germany has progressed from this to a network of interlinking societies with Berlin at the centre. Quite a few of the members are on multiple mailing lists and sent their greetings to the next society that I was visiting. Encouraging these links makes it more likely that mobile younger alumni and recent graduates will become involved with the alumni network.

Undergraduate alumni

A few of the alumni that I met up with individually said that they weren’t too fussed about events put on by the society with which they are registered, because mainly postgrads attend and there is not such a high uptake of students who did an undergraduate degree at Cambridge. This could be a good reason to link up past or recently-graduated undergrads with those just starting a degree at Cambridge in a mentoring scheme, or even just in a casual way. Creating these connections between undergraduates would be enjoyable for the alumni and helpful for the new Cambridge students.

CAM – the alumni magazine

A lot of alumni mentioned CAM, how much they enjoy it, and that they would like to read more writing by current students in it. If students know about the magazine before they leave Cambridge and student contributions been encouraged, then they would be more likely to get involved in the alumni network once graduated. In any case, this would strengthen relations between current students and the network, and make the two groups seem less like two completely separate entities.

Conclusion

Alumni groups need to run regular events, both formal and informal and hence suitable for a wider age range. Connections with current students at Cambridge are also important, so that a progression into the alumni society is natural.

The alumni network should be something to get involved in from the time that you start at Cambridge, which is perhaps not how it’s currently perceived. Alumni societies work best when they have strong links with current Cambridge students and use their Freshers’ Event as a social space for past, present and future students to interact and exchange experiences. It’s important for the barrier between current and past student not to be hermetic.

In general, society members were always keen to know about the report, article and my travels. There was a high level of genuine interest, which speaks well for the success of the Travel Award scheme.