Introduction

Travelling around Europe this summer, I visited alumni societies in Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Hungary. These groups varied in size – from the large and very well-established Austrian society to the much smaller and newer groups in the Baltic States. This report deals with some of the key issues these societies face in terms of attracting members and organising events. Most of my recommendations are for the smaller alumni groups, as the larger and older groups seem to be having fewer problems in these regards.

The value of established events

Many of the alumni societies I spoke to had issues with attendance at events. After hearing from a range of different alumni societies about the huge spectrum of events they run, it seems that the best-attended events are those which are established, regular, and anticipated. This means that they are known about, and people can/ are willing to try to make themselves available for these much more than for ‘random’ events. At first some of these events required patience in running a couple of times before achieving greater attendance, but this investment is worthwhile. Several alumni that I spoke to also expressed a desire to better understand what the group ‘does’, and having a list of regular events can help to recruit new members. Many of the alumni groups have very limited/ non-existent web pages, and putting this information online could perhaps stimulate growth of the societies.

In terms of specific events, many of the groups I visited host annual summer parties and/or Christmas meals. The Czech society hosts a speakers’ event on the first Tuesday of each month, where interesting guests are invited to talk about their life/ work. This event took some time to establish, but is now very successful.

While the Austrian alumni group is bigger than most, it provides a particularly good calendar of events which could serve as inspiration to other societies:

- January: theatre trip with drinks after
- Spring: group watching of the boat race
- Summer: society meal in a Heuringer
- September: cricket game and BBQ event
- September: freshers event
- Autumn: University Challenge quiz (see below)

Of course, more ad-hoc/ one-off events can still be arranged around this timetable.

Links with the British Embassy

Some of the alumni societies I visited had very strong links with their British Embassy, which works to further mutual interests, with the embassy helping to host events and to motivate members to attend said events. It benefits the British Embassy as it is another means of fostering UK-country-specific relations. I would therefore encourage alumni societies who are not in dialogue with their respective embassy to get in touch, as there is lots to be gained. During my visit to Slovenia I
attended a preliminary meeting with some members of the alumni society and the Deputy Head of the British Embassy, and it was a very positive discussion, with both interested in working with the other.

**Helping Current Applicants**

Many alumni members I spoke to expressed some form of interest in helping current students to apply to Oxbridge. Some mentoring schemes are in place in some of the countries I visited, but the broad consensus seemed to be that the alumni felt they didn’t have the expertise or knowledge to help current students, particularly as the admissions system may have changed since their time. In countries with very low levels of Oxbridge attendance, this would be a really good issue to combat. I believe that an information pack disseminated by CUDAR could provide the alumni with a guide on what to say to prospective applicants and advice on approaching schools to give talks/ running mentoring schemes. Perhaps links could be fostered between the Outreach office and the alumni groups via CUDAR. This would also be a good way of engaging with alumni, as some may be more willing to volunteer to help current students than to come along to group talks/ events.

**Relationships with current students**

Some of the alumni societies I met are much more successful at engaging and liaising with current students, and it is clear that this is very helpful in continuing the onward momentum of the society and ensuring that it does not stagnate, particularly in terms of leadership turnover. Below are two examples of how this can work well:

- **Czech Alumni Society**: the two deputy leaders of the society are always current students at Oxford and Cambridge respectively. This means that at least two current students are actively involved in running the society and organising events, engaging them with the society from even before they graduate, and facilitating student-graduate relations. The Czech Society also has it in their constitution that a new leader needs to be elected every two years. While this model wouldn’t work for every society, this does mean that the presidents bring a new energy, keeping the society rolling. The deputy leader role is a natural progression into this role, and it was interesting to see that the Czech society was a lot younger in terms of general demographic compared to some others I visited.

- **Austrian Alumni Society**: this group hosts a very well-established annual freshers event which is attended by lots of alumni, current students and incoming freshers. At this event many of the current students and alumni knew each other well from former events, demonstrating a really positive ongoing dialogue.

In contrast, some societies have little to no contact with current students, which clearly translates to stagnation in terms of incoming new members. Even if it’s not possible to host an event or involve students in the running of the society, there should be some dialogue between the student society representing a particular country and its alumni group. In the instance of some groups, this is not the case. There are mutual benefits in that the societies can support and promote each other, in terms of organising joint events and simply promoting an awareness of the other, particularly in
encouraging graduating student society members to join alumni groups. CUDAR are in an ideal position to facilitate communication between the two and to ensure that the dialogue is continued.

**Putting alumni in touch with the societies**

One of the most frustrating facets to my travels was meeting with alumni who did not know about the alumni group in the country in which they were living. Often these were British people who had moved to the country recently/more temporarily, and I received their contact details via the Clare alumni office, who had been updated on where the alumni are living. If this information could be passed on to the alumni societies, they could get in touch to invite the alumni to their meetings, and this would be beneficial to everyone. If this is not possible due to data protection complications, an alternative would be to encourage colleges who have lists of where their alumni are to send out an email to these alumni about the groups in the countries where they are living, with the colleges encouraging alumni to join on behalf of the groups. This would help to combat the issue many alumni groups feel they have of dwindling membership and poor public visibility.

**Society stagnation**

In the case of a couple of the societies I visited, my trip seemed to act as a sort of catalyst in encouraging the alumni society to organise an event/meeting for the first time in a while (sometimes even for a couple of years). The alumni seemed to really enjoy the events that took place, and thanked me for spurring them into action. It is clear then, that the Travel Award has a useful function in sparking somewhat dormant alumni groups into life. However, other methods should also be considered as not all alumni groups can be visited by Travel Award students. Any means of creating something time-pressured/deadline-driven is useful, as otherwise it’s very easy for the already-busy alumni group leaders to let another few months or years go by without anything happening. This isn’t a problem for the alumni groups with established events (e.g. an annual Christmas dinner) but for the newer/smaller groups this is a real issue.

Perhaps CUDAR should enforce a stipulation that for an alumni group to label itself active (as opposed to dormant) they need to host an alumni event at least every two years, and chase up group leaders to check that this is happening. This isn’t about punishing the alumni groups but rather identifying where support is needed. For struggling societies, CUDAR could help by suggesting events that could take place and helping to organise them. I think this would also encourage leadership handover rather than alumni group stagnation, as my visit almost seemed to remind a leader or two that the group was something they’ve been meaning to hand on. Having a fixed term for leadership is also another good way to combat this issue.

**Communication**

It was sometimes difficult to get in touch with an alumni group, with emails sometimes not being responded to for weeks, or even months. To combat this issue, more than one email address should be given on the Cambridge website pages for each group – leaders should be asked to provide the contact details of another member who can act as an alternate contact and thereby reduce the risk of societies being uncontactable. This would also mean that more than one person has some responsibility for the group – in a couple of cases, the groups are being run entirely by one person, so requiring a second contact would encourage the group leaders to appoint someone else as
treasurer/ secretary/ vice-chair, which could only be a positive in providing more momentum for the group and making it easier to organise events with an extra pair of hands.

**Online**

A lot of these societies have issues with membership because many of their members don’t live in the country, or are away abroad a lot, particularly in the Baltic States/ Slovenia. Perhaps, then, it is worthwhile to consider ways in which the society members can interact without actually meeting in real life. Having video feeds from speaker events, and trying to develop an active Facebook group/ other form of online community could help. One member of the Latvian group suggested that what was needed was a group newsletter, in which members could write about interesting projects they’re working on/ what they’re up to. He highlighted a second issue – namely that the society has some really interesting members, but many people don’t come along to events because they’re not aware of these people. Having an annual/ biannual newsletter could help to generate enthusiasm from group members and create a stronger sense of belonging the society.

**Inter-alumni group connections**

Another surprise on my travels was that many alumni groups I met were very keen to hear more about what the other alumni groups are up to. There really is a lack of dialogue between the alumni groups, and a greater awareness of the activities each carries out could be useful for providing inspiration to group leaders. One way in which this could be approached would be in combination with hearing about what each alumni group has been up to –perhaps at the end of each year/ every other each leader could submit a paragraph about their activities which could be compiled into a newsletter to be sent out to the leaders. While there is already a leadership conference, a conference call discussion/other avenues of dialogue (a mailing group/ LinkedIn/ Facebook group) for discussion should be pursued.

**Joint events**

One way to combat the membership issue is to host joint events. Some societies are very good at hosting events with the Oxford alumni group (where they exist separately), LSE (particularly, as it has a very international student body), British unis generally, or American universities such as Harvard. Larger attendance has a snowball effect of encouraging more members to come, and makes for events which can take place on a bigger scale. Therefore this too is to be encouraged. A particularly good example of this is the Austrian alumni society’s annual University Challenge event, where alumni groups from a range of universities are invited to submit teams to compete in a championship.

**Splinter Groups**

In most countries I visited, alumni group activity is centred in the capital city, which makes sense when membership is small and the country not that big. However, in some places – e.g. Poland – there is a large concentration of alumni in other cities (Krakow in this case) who are therefore inactive. One way to combat this issue would be to encourage more casual events in these alternate cities – when I was in Krakow, one of the alumni group members invited fellow alumni who he knew and some other friends to a dinner, which was a lovely event. Such informal gatherings should be encouraged.
Conclusion

This report points out some simple tweaks which could greatly help to improve the running of the alumni groups. On the whole, also, it is worth noting that no alumni remarked to me that they felt they were contacted too frequently by the Cambridge Alumni Office. Therefore, passing on more information about the kind of events the groups could be running, advice (such as this report), and just ensuring this is an ongoing dialogue about their activities would certainly be welcome.