How alumni groups can engage with students and recent graduates

This summer I had the fantastic opportunity to travel around part of Europe for 15 days visiting alumni groups from the Cambridge alumni network. I visited the alumni groups of Madrid, Valencia, Northern Italy, Geneva, Austria and Slovenia, groups of varying sizes and scopes, and was warmly welcomed in every city I had the pleasure to visit. It was a truly brilliant experience and I hope, from the extremely varied groups visited, that I have gained some insights into how the alumni groups work and how they can further engage with students and recent graduates. I believe that the overarching theme of my findings is that by engaging with new students at the stage that they are ‘freshers’, and maintaining contact throughout their studies, the transformation from student to alumni group member will be far more successful and the group will grow in an organic way.

Connecting with Student Societies

In many cases, alumni groups maintain connections with the current student society at Cambridge from that country. This, I found, was instrumental in connecting the alumni groups with current students (and, naturally, then the recent graduates). An example is that in Austria, the alumni society is rather large, with multiple yearly events including trips to the opera, cricket days, a boat race event etc. This group maintains strong connections with the student group at Cambridge, with the president of both the Oxford and Cambridge societies (being a mixed alumni group) being present at the freshers’ event I attended, and giving speeches to welcome the students to their respective universities. I really enjoyed the event and found it very encouraging that students were already connecting with the student society, swapping details and finding out about how to join them. Through the two societies staying connected, this was also an obvious path for new alumni group members, who seemed to transfer from one to the other effortlessly after graduation.

I found that the freshers’ event in Madrid also worked well to attract current students, as they invited them back to the freshers’ events throughout their time at Cambridge. Speaking to many of the current students there (of which there were a considerable amount!) they said that they had enjoyed and valued their own freshers’ event and therefore why would they not return the following year! In Slovenia, speaking to Nina who runs the society there, I found that she had tried to contact the Slovenian society, which she and her husband had actually founded whilst at Cambridge, and had been met with not being approved to be a part of the mailing list and a lack of response from the current student president. This seemed a real shame as it is such a great connection to maintain, so I would suggest that one option, if possible, would be that CUDAR could contact student
society presidents and make introductions between the alumni groups and the student societies.

**Introduction Email**

A key time to introduce new graduates to the alumni group is clearly at the time when they first officially become alumni, after graduation. Upon conversations with both alumni group members and recent graduates back in Cambridge, it seems that an easy way to attract new alumni group members would be to ensure that an email is sent out upon graduation to all new graduates, informing them of the alumni group opportunities awaiting them.

This suggestion is not as simple as it seems, since alumni groups cannot automatically have a list of all new graduates who will be living in their respective countries or cities. The solution, as it stands, would be for each alumni group to send an email via the alumni department to all graduates registered to be living in their countries. Another connection would be via colleges, since from speaking to various people, often they hold more information on alumni locations. A different option, suggested to me by Alessandro of the alumni group of Northern Italy, was that the alumni department could send out an email to all graduating students asking if they would like to be included in lists made available to alumni groups in the location they were going to live in. This would enable direct alumni group access to new potential members and thus would aid the process of attracting new graduates. This would also help to tackle the issue of non native students going to live in a given country, since students could be asked where their net location would be.

**Events for New Graduates**

From observing how well the freshers’ events in Madrid, Geneva and Vienna seemed to go, and how keen the freshers were to connect with one another and the society itself, it seems to me that a successful way of connecting with new graduates would be to hold a similar event soon after graduation, for new graduate members to meet the alumni society. By having a welcome event like this, new graduates would have the opportunity to engage with the society straight after graduation and thus find out what the group had to offer them throughout their new lives as Cambridge alumni. If well publicized by the alumni department, this event would also enable the group to attract new graduates who were not originally from the country but are moving there for career or personal reasons, since these are the graduates who often most value the possibility of joining an alumni group due to a lack of connections, both personal and professional, in the country that they are moving to. In many of the groups I visited, a large proportion was not originally from the country/city in question and thus I believe that new graduates who are moving to a new country are especially worth focusing on, since they, in many ways, have the most to gain from alumni group membership, since they told me that coming to a new country
was rather scary and knowing you have somewhere to make friends is a particularly attractive idea.

An additional point here is that I believe that the freshers’ events, especially if then followed up with further connections with current students, are great events to welcome students not only to Cambridge but to their country’s alumni groups. One piece of advice would be that it seems to make sense to just have one event per country rather than per city to keep the numbers high enough. For example, I heard in Valencia how no one was keen to attend a freshers event, and I had met a girl at the Madrid freshers event who was actually from Valencia but had travelled to Madrid for the event itself.

Whilst the event previously described would be held in the country itself and would be specific to the alumni group, another option would be the idea of an ‘alumni fair’ in ‘graduate week’, similar to the freshers’ fair held at the start of each year for new students. This could be a drinks event or some kind of a networking event enabling new graduates who were keen to join their new alumni societies to come along and chat to the alumni department about alumni opportunities, as well as to meet any alumni group members who were available to fly back to Cambridge to represent their societies. In theory, this could be combined with the leadership conference, so that alumni groups could simply extend the trips they already had in place in late June/early July. From speaking to recently graduated students, they didn’t know much about alumni group at all, and believed that if this event had taken place it would have been of use to many of them, especially international students. In my opinion, this would be a great way to engage students at the stage when they are very sentimental about Cambridge and ultimately keen to maintain all the connections with the university possible in their later lives.

Following on from this idea, another event which I feel is particularly useful, and practiced at some of the groups I visited, like Madrid and Austria, is the Christmas Dinner. I feel that by inviting new students back for a Christmas dinner after their first term, and advertising this at the freshers event before they head off to Cambridge, groups would be able to cement their connections with current students, enabling a natural connection with new graduates a few years later. The general theme here is that having regular events which current students are also invited to enables them to feel a sense of belonging to the alumni group before they even graduate and join the group permanently.

**Alumni – Student Mentoring Schemes**

Trinity Engineering Alumni maintain regular alumni connections via a mentoring scheme and events twice a year for students and alumni to network, listen to a talk and have dinner. When the mentoring scheme is successful it is a great system and enables the student to receive career guidance and advice, as well as just generally hearing about life after Cambridge. In my case the mentoring scheme has worked excellently, however I know that some alumni groups felt that forcing connections was the wrong way to go, so that is a decision to be
made on an individual group basis. However, if it was something that they felt was appropriate, pairing new students with alumni group members, by introductions at a freshers’ event or email exchanges, could be a great way to establish concrete connections throughout their time as students and into their lives as alumni.

Alumni Groups Online and on Social Media

Another great way to connect current students and new graduates with alumni groups would be the existence of an online platform. Linking to the idea discussed previously, an online platform or database with email addresses of those members who signed up to be contactable would enable current students to learn more about alumni whilst at Cambridge, and approach them for academic or careers advice and guidance, since on my travels I met the most incredibly knowledgeable and friendly people- a resource that would be so useful to current students. If this platform was uniform amongst all alumni groups it would enable students to easily find alumni groups wherever they went in the world.

Currently, if the database of individuals for mentoring and advice was found to be an unsuccessful idea, the alumni department’s page on groups is a great start for finding groups, however many groups do not have much information on their pages and thus do not come across particularly welcoming to new graduates. In addition, the page itself isn’t widely known by recent graduates and so some of the ideas discussed already would certainly help to raise its profile.

Similarly, social media is a great way to connect and engage with current students and recent graduates. By blogging as I went around Europe, I was extremely surprised to find the reach of my blog across different groups that I am a part of here at Cambridge. Students practically spend half of their lives on social media and thus it is a really great way to get their attention. I discussed with each of the groups I visited about their Facebook pages, with the Northern Italy having an especially up to date page, and concluded that whilst a closed facebook page may be desirable for the general running of the society, an open and public page is far more welcoming, so that students can have a browse of what is going on at the alumni group and feel that it is completely acceptable to send the group president a message about joining in. A warm and inviting facebook page will generally work wonders when it comes to attracting students, as many that I found were closed and thus rather intimidating. My conversations with alumni and students suggests that facebook is certainly the best start, however for particularly keen groups, twitter can be used for regular updates and constant visibility, while LinkedIn is good for creating a more professional network of Cambridge Graduates.

Conclusions
After an absolutely fabulous 15 days I have learnt that alumni groups are really excellent organisations and students are so lucky to have them to join when they graduate. However, there are clearly engagement issues as so many students do not connect with alumni groups. Speaking to groups in Northern Italy and Slovenia for example, the groups are very keen to gain new members, especially since they would like to pass on group leadership to younger members with more enthusiasm and a different take on things, after a long time leading the societies themselves. The key points are to be as visible as possible upon graduation each year, via emails, events, social media etc. and to broaden this reach across all students rather than just those with the group’s nationality, since often the most keen on joining alumni groups are those moving to the country in question with no previous background there. In addition, the connection between alumni groups and their related student societies is a great way of establishing connections with current students and making the step into alumni group membership a far more obvious one. Overall I don’t think drastic changes need to be put in place at all as the groups I have met are so friendly and welcoming that I am sure many recent graduates would love to be a part of their activities- it is only a matter of becoming more visible.