



Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges

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1 INTRODUCTION

This report was carried out within the framework of the VM-BASE project. VM-BASE is an acronym for Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges. As such, the project wants to investigate the possibilities of supporting students virtually before and after their (physical) exchange. This study addresses the question, **how students and teachers embarked in physical and virtual mobility activities can network and participate in a wider community after their experiences.**

The different case studies can be seen to help answering some of the most important questions related to this topic: Who are the alumni? What is their profile? What are they interested in? Why do they want to network? How can ICT tools help? What are the big challenges? Can we find success factors? Also recommendations on how to set up and support a **Virtual Alumni Association** are outlined. The study methodology included a thorough literature search, as well as some hands-on working with the project partners. For the case studies, a number of websites were scanned through, and one face-to-face interview was done.

The VM-BASE project partners include the following institutions: Helsinki University of Technology (TKK), Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Catholic University of Leuven (K.U.Leuven), Catholic Polytechnic Leuven (KHLeuven), University of Edinburgh (UofE), University of Tartu (UT), University of West Hungary, Faculty of Geoinformatics (NYME-GEO), EuroPACE ivzw, Coimbra Group, ESU – The European Students’ Union and BEST – Board of European Students of Technology.

Before going into the details, however, it seems only reasonable to explain some of the unfamiliar concepts used in this study. What are virtual alumni associations, virtual alumni or virtual students for that matter? What is the concept of virtual mobility? How do these relate to one another? According to the glossary of elearning.info, virtual mobility means:

The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to obtain the same benefits as one would have with physical mobility but without the need to travel.

The term ‘alumnus’ (pl. alumni), in turn, refers to graduates or former students of a school, college, or university, whereas an alumni association is an association of these alumni. (Wikipedia) In this study, the term ‘virtual alumni association’ refers to an alumni association, of which members (virtual alumni) have attended either physical mobility programs or virtual mobility programs. The virtual alumni primarily interact via communication media, the Internet, rather than face-to-face for social, professional and educational purposes.

On the other hand, virtual communities are today’s ‘communities’ also in the alumni relations, and one of the reasons for that is internationalization: alumni are becoming more and more globally dispersed and highly mobile, which means that they are

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almost impossible to reach in conventional ways. Additionally, a fundamental shift in the way students and alumni relate, communicate, decide and advocate is underway. With the help of online services and electronic communication, however, even the alumni further away can be held on to. (Peterson. 2007 & The Illuminate Consulting Group. 2007) One major change on the communication scene has also been the emergence of various social networks. (Lundberg. 2007)

The web is dynamic. When alumni relations moved from excel sheets to the web, the activities of alumni networks also became dynamic. The younger alumni are not as loyal as the generations before. So how are the long-term relationships with the much differentiated alumni groups kept both dynamic and attractive? (Lundberg. 2007) This is also a question worth thinking about.

2 ALUMNI ASSOCIATIONS

An **alumnus** (pl. alumni) according to the American Heritage Dictionary is a male graduate or former student of a school, college, or university. An **alumna** (pl. alumnae), in turn, is a female graduate or former student of a school, college, or university. The term is sometimes shortened to alum, which stands for an alumna or alumnus. Even the plural form 'alumni' is often used as a singular form for both genders. (Wikipedia)

An **alumni association** is an association of graduates or, more broadly, of former students. In the UK and the US, the alumni of universities, colleges, schools, fraternities and sororities often form groups with alumni from the same organization. These associations usually organize social events, publish newsletters or magazines, and raise funds for the organization. Additionally, such groups often support new alumni, and provide a forum to form new friendships and business relationships with people of similar background. (Wikipedia)

Alumni associations are mainly organized around institutions or departments of institutions, but may also be organized among students that studied in a certain city, region or country. Alumni associations can also include associations of former employees of a business (corporate alumni). An alumnus of a company is one who has formerly been employed by the company. (Wikipedia)

In Anglo-Saxon countries, membership of an alumni association often goes without saying. In continental Europe, alumni associations are only getting more popular as the universities receive less money from governments and depend more on networking within civil society for funding. (Wikipedia) According to Azri, Petrus Communication & the INTAL Special Interest Group of EAIE (2005), however, the alumni relations culture in Europe is still one of the major challenges European HE institutions face in their alumni relations work.

3 IDENTITY AND ADDED VALUE

3.1 Meeting the needs of different stakeholders

What is the added value of various alumni activities then? For most people, (virtual) alumni associations are, first and foremost, the means of communication and collaboration with other students and alumni. In addition, they provide a forum for networking and sharing of experiences. Through these associations, students and alumni can also keep in touch not only with others alike, but also with their former teachers and institutions.

Additionally, it is important to understand that the needs and interests of students and alumni vary depending on their prevailing life situation – whether it is the time before, during or after the exchange and whether one is still a student or not. Alumni, who are already in working life, surely have different needs and interests than those, who are still studying.

Nevertheless, students and alumni are not the only ones, who need and benefit from these associations. Institutions and teachers need them too. According to a study coordinated by the UK Socrates Erasmus Council (2005), returning and incoming (Erasmus) students are of high importance to HE institutions: overall 70 % of HE institutions say that returning Erasmus students are used as mentors for new Erasmus students, and 60 % help with the recruitment of future Erasmus students.

Several institutions / departments also speak of the returning Erasmus students enriching the institution in a variety of ways: either by confirming what the institutions do or by providing insightful criticism; returning students' feedback to the institution is usually more critical. The involvement of returning students in student mentoring / tutoring is also invaluable. (UK Socrates Erasmus Council. 2005)

Additionally, alumni networks are of high importance in the collaboration of institutions and employers. Institutions need to work more closely with employers in promoting and developing programs as well as in promoting mobility. They also need to recognize the need for closer co-operation with professional bodies. Employers are interested in graduates with experience of different cultures. According to a study coordinated by the UK Socrates Erasmus Council (2005), more than a quarter of employers say that an Erasmus experience has been a factor in selecting the graduate for the job.

3.2 Drivers and challenges

One of the biggest challenges that most alumni associations face is, how to locate and keep in contact with the alumni. A common problem is also the lack of information about the (Erasmus) alumni, especially among employers. (UK Socrates Erasmus Council. 2005) Another challenge is how to really make these networks function. Many institutions proclaim that alumni networks simply do not work for them. According to The Illuminate Consulting Group (2006), a functional network requires a long-term institutional vision, a well-crafted strategic plan, effective and efficient execution at an operational level, and most of all, a desire to succeed.

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US universities are far ahead of the rest of the world in this field. In 2005, the alumni of US universities donated some \$ 7.1 billion to universities and colleges, and more than 20 US universities raised more than \$ 50 million from their alumni each. For the rest of the world, these are really staggering numbers. Catching up, if possible at all, will require decades of sustained institutional development efforts – and an understanding that large scale fundraising is the end product of a long-term, mutual relationship building process. (The Illuminate Consulting Group. 2006)

The recent years have seen a notable increase in the attention paid to alumni networks worldwide. The Illuminate Consulting Group (2006) points out four main drivers contributing to this increase in attention: **(1) mutual economic and social advantage, (2) life-long networking, (3) internationalization and (4) professionalization.**

Hence, understanding the significance of mutual advantage is of high importance. According to The Illuminate Consulting Group (2006), there is a strong correlation between an alumni network serving as a source of competitive institutional advantage and value creation for alumni themselves. Another thing that is required is an understanding for the need to create a life-long networking culture. Each institution should, thus, aim to build relationships with students from day one so that they become supporters for life.

Institutions should also understand that the most relevant relationship – and network value – is created amongst students / alumni themselves. Enabling the maintenance and the creation of additional relationships within the alumni network is, thus, a key network task. By fostering such life-long relationships, an institution will create the strongest network value proposition, which in turn drives alumni appreciation for their alma mater. (The Illuminate Consulting Group. 2006)

Additionally, alumni networks are increasingly becoming more internationalized. In consequence, the roles, expectations and contributions of international alumni to their alma mater have begun to shift. This also sets out new challenges to the institutions. (The Illuminate Consulting Group. 2006)

Finally, as with most other complex social organizations, alumni networks require expert guidance, an ownership culture, a communication infrastructure and a carefully assembled organizational design. These requirements, according to The Illuminate Consulting Group (2006), translate into a simple paradigm: Alumni networks can only function properly and create mutual value, if they are administered professionally.

4 CASE STUDIES

4.1 Different concepts

In the following case studies, the different types of alumni networks are roughly divided in four categories: **(1) commission driven networks**, **(2) institution driven networks**, **(3) user driven networks** and **(4) student organization driven networks**. Our main focus is on such alumni networks, which above all are targeted to the international exchange students. In the following pages, the different concepts, as well as their strengths and weaknesses (gathered from project partners) are discussed in more detail.

4.2 Commission driven networks

Alumni associations, such as the Erasmus Mundus Students and Alumni Association (EMA) and the Alumni for Europe (AfE), which are driven by the European Commission, are types of more formal alumni networks. Their mission is to serve the interests of all stakeholders of international student exchange: students, alumni, institutions, parents, employers and the European Commission. They also provide a forum for networking, communication and collaboration and promote the European education programs. (Erasmus Mundus Students and Alumni Association & Alumni for Europe)

Commission driven networks are not directly organized into any chapters by e.g. city, region, or country, but are for all exchange students under a particular program. In most cases, the networks are also closed: for alumni only. Unfortunately, the level of interactivity among the students and alumni is quite low in commission driven networks. (Erasmus Mundus Students and Alumni Association & Alumni for Europe)

4.2.1 Erasmus Mundus Students and Alumni Association (EMA)

Erasmus Mundus Students and Alumni Association (EMA) (<http://www.em-a.eu/>) is a network for students and alumni of all Erasmus Mundus Master's Course (EMMC) programs. Since its establishment in 2006, EMA has constantly been working to advance the Erasmus Mundus program, and to offer a platform where students and alumni can exchange information and experiences. All its activities are performed by members on a voluntary basis, and in cooperation with the European Commission. (Erasmus Mundus Students and Alumni Association)

Erasmus Mundus stands for 80 international Master's programs, more than 3 000 students from over 50 countries and more than 200 participating universities. The mission of the alumni association is to serve the interests of Erasmus Mundus Students and Alumni, by providing a forum for networking, communication and collaboration and by promoting Erasmus Mundus as a European program of excellence in international education. According to EMA's website, its goals are as following (Erasmus Mundus Students and Alumni Association):

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- to contribute to the successful internationalization of higher education,
- to create a representative network for Erasmus Mundus graduates from Europe and third world countries,
- to establish a channel of communication for students, alumni, their universities, and the European Commission, as well as
- to provide students with academic advice based on the experience of previous generations.

At the moment, EMA's main tasks are promotion, newsletter, magazine, conferences and events, information technology, jobs for alumni and students, as well as EMA Policy. All members of EMA are able to find and advertise housing, find and publish scientific papers, share one's favorite blogs, receive newsletters, find other alumni and stay in touch with their course mates through the association. (Erasmus Mundus Students and Alumni Association)

Some of the strengths and weaknesses of EMA are listed in table 1. The list is not comprehensive. However, some of the attributes may also concern some other (Commission driven) networks.

1. *The strengths and weaknesses of Erasmus Mundus Students and Alumni Association (EMA).*

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Professionally run and sustainable• Creates mutual advantage for all stakeholders• International• Offers a variety of services to both students and alumni (e.g. monthly newsletter and information about jobs, internships, projects and trainees, conferences, seminars)• Promotes the Erasmus Mundus program• Informative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Only for the Erasmus Mundus students and alumni (can also be a strength, when there is not so much diversity)• Distant and formal, little interactivity among the students / alumni• Brand awareness only in European top universities• No subdivisions by e.g. institutions or countries

4.2.2 Alumni for Europe (AfE)

Alumni for Europe (AfE) (<http://newsite.tpf.iif.hu/alumni/en/index.php>) established by the Tempus Public Foundation (TPF) (<http://english.tpf.hu/>) works as an interactive network for students having participated in European training programs (Erasmus, CEEPUS, Erasmus Mundus, Comenius, Leonardo and DAAD) coordinated by the TPF. At the moment, there are some 1 800 registered members and some hundred active participants in the network. (Lucas. 2008)

Additionally, there are three groups of people, who can be distinguished in the network: (1) Hungarian students having been on an international exchange, now back in Hungary, (2) foreign students on an exchange in Hungary and (3) former students /

graduates having participated in one of the aforementioned exchange programs. (Lucas. 2008) According to the AfE website, the Alumni for Europe network aims at:

- giving assistance to Erasmus, Leonardo, CEEPUS, Erasmus Mundus and World-Language grant holders in building an interactive network,
- helping foreign grant holders in Hungary to get to know the country and to enjoy their scholarships by organizing various activities and events,
- letting foreign and Hungarian students get to know other cultures and give them the opportunity to learn different languages from one another,
- contributing to the employment of graduate students by advising and establishing contact with the employers,
- helping future scholars with their preparation, as well as
- providing information about the educational and training programs coordinated by TPF and other potential scholarships.

The strengths and weaknesses of AfE are listed in table 2. The list is not comprehensive. However, some of the attributes may also concern other (Commission driven) networks.

2. *The strengths and weaknesses of Alumni for Europe (AfE).*

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial support from the European Commission and the Hungarian government • Professionally run and sustainable • International • Physical existence (office, staff, events, publications, website) • Provides lots of useful information to Hungarian students who want to go abroad, as well as to foreign students who are on an exchange in Hungary • Organizes several events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulties in reaching both incoming and outgoing students because of privacy protection: AfE must ask the program coordinators to ask the students to send their contact information to AfE • Capacity to attract more members limited to Hungary

4.2.3 Other Commission driven networks

Lately, there has also been discussion about a joint network for the Erasmus alumni. During academic year 2006 – 2007, a collaborative Erasmus Alumni Association Feasibility Study, funded by the European Commission, was conducted. The purpose of the study was to outline the need for establishing a joint network for the Erasmus alumni. (CIMOn ututiskirje korkeakouluille. 2007)

As a conclusion, the working group decided to recommend that an Erasmus Alumni Association (EAA) should be established with the utmost speed to take advantage of the timeliness of the 20th Anniversary of Erasmus and the launch of the new Lifelong

Learning Program. The surveys and workshops carried out within the context of the study confirmed that there is an urgent need for an EAA. There are already a range of commercial operators in the field that benefit from the fact that no such network owned by the European Commission exists. (UK Socrates Erasmus Council. 2008) For the time being, however, it has been decided that such network will not be established.

4.3 Institution driven networks

As aforementioned, most alumni associations are organized around institutions or departments of institutions. The OU Alumni at The Open University UK, the PoliAlumni at Helsinki University of Technology (TKK) and the DAAD Alumni at The German Academic Exchange Service are just a few examples. The first two consist of former university students, whereas the latter consists of former DAAD scholarship holders. There are also alumni associations that are organized around e.g. single degree programs.

Azri and Petrus Communications, in cooperation with the INTAL Special Interest Group of EAIE, conducted a survey about the alumni relationship management in European HE institutions (2005). According to the survey, alumni relations are growing in importance in Europe for many reasons. However, there is still plenty of work to do. Some of the survey highlights are listed in the following (Azri & Petrus Communications. 2005):

Organization of alumni relations:

- Most European higher education institutions have a separate alumni relations office. Nonetheless, 8 % claim not to have anyone in charge of alumni relations.
- The majority said that alumni relations are of strategic or high importance to their institution.
- Institution promotion, alumni tracking, and new student recruitment are felt to be the most important benefits to be gained from the engagement with alumni.
- Generating additional funding from alumni is not seen to be an important benefit, whereas communication with alumni is.

Alumni relations activities:

- Most institutions already have or plan on building an online portal or online database.
- Over 20 % are not satisfied with their local and international alumni networks.
- Less than 35 % are satisfied with their printed newsletters, but over 50 % are satisfied with their online newsletters.
- Over a half accept donations from the alumni. However, only 20 % run fundraising campaigns.
- 55 % feel that the alumni relations culture in Europe is one of the major challenges in their alumni relations work.

4.3.1 The OU Alumni

The Open University UK (<http://www.open.ac.uk/>) is the only university in the United Kingdom dedicated to distance learning. There are some 150 000 undergraduate and more than 30 000 postgraduate students at The OU. More than 25 000 students live outside the UK. **The OU Alumni** (<http://www.open.ac.uk/alumni/>) is the alumni association at The Open University UK. Currently, there are more than 2 million members in the network. (The Open University, The Open University Alumni & Wikipedia)

All OU students automatically become members of The OU Alumni, when they have completed their certificate, diploma or degree. The network offers various activities and services, such as events, study and career services, publications and other offers, to all its members. Networking is also made easier through The OU Alumni website. (The Open University Alumni & Wikipedia)

The strengths and weaknesses of The OU Alumni are listed in table 3. The list is not comprehensive. However, some of the attributes may also concern other (institution driven) networks.

3. *The strengths and weaknesses of The OU Alumni.*

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Professionally run and sustainable• Encourages networking through university's existing 'connections'• Genuine interest in keeping in contact with the former students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No sorting of students – exchange students are just like any other students• More focus on keeping in contact with the alumni than on helping the alumni to keep in contact with one another• Visiting students are not likely to make donations

4.3.2 PoliAlumni

Helsinki University of Technology (TKK) (<http://www.tkk.fi/en/index.html>) is the oldest university of technology in Finland. There are some 15 000 under and postgraduate students at TKK. The fields of education and research cover all areas of technology that are of importance to the Finnish economy, including architecture. (Helsinki University of Technology)

PoliAlumni (<http://alumni.tkk.fi/en/>) is an extensive friendship and professional network, where all former students and employees of TKK can join in. PoliAlumni brings together people from TKK and aims to maintain and promote the relationship and cooperation between TKK and its alumni. At the moment, there are more than 10 300 PoliAlumni members and over 6 200 PoliAlumni network users. According to the PoliAlumni website, the members of PoliAlumni get:

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- the ability to use the PoliAlumni network service,
- connected with former fellow students and/or co-workers as well as have the possibility to make new acquaintances through alumni network and events,
- information about the latest developments at TKK and in the world of science,
- invitations to alumni events, seminars and the public defense of dissertation,
- the possibility to act as a mentor, sponsor or advisor for TKK students,
- the possibility to use TKK Career Service's job applicant services free of charge,
- an electronic alumni newsletter twice a year,
- TKK's interest group magazine Polysteekki once a year,
- discounts from TKK logo products,
- information about postgraduate study opportunities and further education at TKK, as well as
- discounts from the TKK Open University classes and services offered by the Innovation Center.

In addition, PoliAlumni offers an interactive network service, where TKK alumni can create their own contact networks, establish groups and join in their own department's alumni clubs or associations. With the help of the alumni network, the alumni can also keep in touch with former fellow students and friends from TKK. However, this internet-based network service is only available in Finnish, which is not very user-friendly towards international students. (PoliAlumni)

The strengths and weaknesses of PoliAlumni are listed in table 4. The list is not comprehensive. However, some of the attributes may also concern other (institution driven) networks.

4. *The strengths and weaknesses of PoliAlumni.*

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Professionally run and sustainable• Supports the connection between former TKK students• Offers a variety of services to both students and alumni	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No sorting of students – exchange students are just like any other students• Online services available only in Finnish• Challenges caused by internationalization• Visiting students are not likely to make donations

4.3.3 DAAD Alumni

The German Academic Exchange Service (Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst – DAAD) (<http://www.daad.de/en/index.html>) is one of the world's largest intermediary organizations in its field. DAAD supports and promotes all areas related

to science, research, language and teaching, among other things. Its goals are (Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst):

- **to offer scholarships for foreigners:** to promote young foreign elites as a means of attracting future leaders in education, science, research and culture, in business and industry, in politics and in the media as partners and friends of Germany.
- **to offer scholarships for Germans:** to promote young German elites in order to qualify them as open-minded future leading figures in education, science and research, in culture, in business and industry, in politics and in the media in the spirit of international and intercultural experience.
- **to internationalize the higher education institutions:** to promote the internationality and appeal of German universities to ensure that Germany remains a leading address for young academics and researchers from all around the world.
- **to promote German studies and the German language abroad:** to promote German studies, the German language, literature and area studies at selected universities around the world in order to strengthen German as a major international cultural language and lingua franca and to advance interest in, and knowledge and understanding for Germany.
- **educational cooperation with developing countries:** to promote academic and scientific advancement in developing countries and in the transformation countries of Central and Eastern Europe as a means of supporting the economic and democratic reform process there.

DAAD Alumni (<http://www.daad.de/alumni/en/index.html>), in turn, are the former DAAD scholarship holders (alumni): students, doctoral / PhD candidates, post-docs, lecturers and teaching assistants, as well as university teachers and professors. The alumni work of DAAD aims at (DAAD Alumni):

- continuing contacts between alumni themselves, and between alumni, their German host universities and DAAD,
- maintaining professional, academic and personal ties with Germany by providing a regular information service,
- contributing to deepening and extending academic exchange between the alumni's home country and the host country, thereby making a positive contribution to the internationalization of higher education,
- using the experience, knowledge and insights gained by alumni during their study and research stays in Germany to benefit the current generation of scholarship holders and others interested in studying in Germany in the future.

Some of the strengths and weaknesses of DAAD Alumni are listed in table 5. The list is not comprehensive. However, some of the attributes may also concern other (institution driven) networks.

5. *The strengths and weaknesses of DAAD Alumni.*

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professionally run and sustainable • Supports the connection between alumni themselves • Supports the alumni to maintain their ties with Germany professionally, academically and personally • Provides a regular information service • Diversity among the alumni (can also be a weakness) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of commitment from the alumni?

4.4 User driven networks

Today, there are also a great number of various social networking sites, such as MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn, and their translated versions. These networks are usually more informal and more interactive than any other types of alumni networks, and most importantly they are not closed. The main purpose of these networks is to let people share their experiences and ideas, connect with other people from different countries, years and institutions, as well as to ask for and give advice to one another.

The fact that these networks are usually user driven also has the effect that many important stakeholders are being excluded from the society. On the other hand, the exchange of ideas and thoughts is, without a doubt, a lot more personal. The users are more in control. At the moment, there are hundreds of different kinds of groups related to Erasmus exchanges on e.g. Facebook.

Some of the strengths and weaknesses of user driven networks are listed in table 6. The list is not comprehensive.

6. *The strengths and weaknesses of user driven alumni associations.*

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exchange of ideas and thoughts easier and more personal • Additional communication channels through one community • Well-known among the users • Easy access: many users already have accounts in these networks, so “barriers to register” are almost non-existent • Informal (can also be a weakness) • Interactive • High motivation and commitment • Available also for the institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excludes important stakeholders • Non-professional • Not very sustainable, reliable nor predictable • Dependent on the platform being sustained • No censorship • Focus on the commercial success

Some institutions have also created their own alumni groups in these online communities. According to The Illuminate Consulting Group (2007), about 20 % of US institutions have set up alumni and recruiting presences on MySpace and Facebook. There are also similar groups on LinkedIn. The idea behind these alumni groups is to link the closed alumni-only networks with individuals' larger, non-alumni networks. One could also imagine that the level of professionalization increases, when a user driven alumni group becomes institution driven.

On the other hand, some alumni associations have also started to create their own versions of social networking sites and emulate their popularity in an effort to keep in closer touch with former students. Many of the sites have, however, struggled to attract alumni and to keep them interacting with the devotion they show to their online profiles on other networks. So it remains to be seen, whether more institutions will create alumni groups in these already existing networks or simply build their own. (Hermes. 2008)

4.4.1 Facebook and MySpace

Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/>) and **MySpace** (<http://www.myspace.com/>) are online communities that connect people through a network of reliable friends. One can create a community, talk online, share photos, journals and interests with a growing network of friends. (Facebook & MySpace) At the moment, Facebook is driving the development landscape, whereas MySpace is loosing relevance. (The Illuminate Consulting Group. 2007)

Facebook was launched in February 2004. It is a privately held company, which develops technologies that facilitate the sharing of information through the social graph, the digital mapping of people's real-world social connections. Facebook is a social utility that connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around them. People use Facebook to keep up with friends, upload photos, share links and videos, and learn more about the people they meet. (Facebook & Wikipedia)

Anyone can sign up for Facebook and interact with the people they know. Facebook is a part of millions of people's lives and half of the users return daily. There are more than 67 million users, an average of 250 000 new registrations per day since January 2007, over 55 000 regional, work-related, collegiate and high school networks, as well as more than 500 alumni networks on Facebook. (Facebook & Wikipedia)

MySpace is similar to Facebook, except that it was launched almost a year earlier (2003). MySpace is a social networking website offering an interactive, user-submitted network of friends, personal profiles, blogs, groups, photos, music and videos internationally. The 100 millionth account was created in August 2006, and a news story claimed 106 million accounts in September 2006. The site reportedly attracts 230 000 new registrations per day. (MySpace & Wikipedia)

4.4.2 LinkedIn

LinkedIn (<http://www.linkedin.com/>) is a business-oriented social networking site founded in December 2002 and launched in May 2003. It is mainly used for

professional networking. In March 2008, the network had more than 20 million registered users, spanning some 150 industries. LinkedIn is free for anyone to join. (The Illuminate Consulting Group. 2007)

The purpose of LinkedIn is to allow registered users to maintain a list of contact details of people they know and trust in business. The people in the list are called connections. Users can invite anyone (whether a site user or not) to become a connection. This list of connections can then be used in a number of ways. (LinkedIn & Wikipedia)

The contact network consists of direct connections, the connections of their connections (termed second-degree connections) and also the connections of these second-degree connections (termed third-degree connections). The network can be used to find jobs, people and business opportunities recommended by someone in one's contact network. Employers can also list jobs and search for potential candidates, whereas job seekers can review the profile of hiring managers and discover which of their existing contacts can introduce them. (LinkedIn & Wikipedia)

Many professionals also advance their careers and business goals by counting on industry and professional groups, alumni organizations, industry conferences and corporate alumni groups to help them make new business contacts. LinkedIn Groups offers extra features to group-based organizations to help their members stay in touch with one another and discover new business contacts within their groups and beyond. (LinkedIn)

Several academic institutions have indeed set up alumni presences on LinkedIn. At the moment (July 2008), there are e.g. over a hundred academic alumni organizations listed on LinkedIn. In general, LinkedIn Groups is designed for groups with an established affinity between its members. However, LinkedIn also has the right not to accept applications from groups that do not have an existing member base or affinity, or that do not serve a business or professional purpose. (LinkedIn)

4.5 Student organization driven networks

Different student organizations, such as the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) and BEST – Board of European Students of Technology, also have their own alumni associations. ESN Alumni is the alumni association of former ESN members, whereas BEST AlumniNet is for former BEST members. These networks are usually in close contact with the actual student organizations and also play an important role in the overall development of the organizations.

Some of the strengths and weaknesses of student organization driven networks are listed in table 7. The list is not comprehensive.

7. *The strengths and weaknesses of student organization driven alumni associations.*

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable • Genuinely based on students' needs • Strong motivation to attract as many alumni as possible • In contact with local student organizations • Life-long networking ⇔ students' motivation and commitment high • Wide networks • Active development of the entire network • Several events • More informal (can also be a weakness) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not all stakeholders are included

4.5.1 Erasmus Student Network Alumni Society

ESN – Erasmus Student Network (<http://www.esn.org/>) is one of the biggest interdisciplinary student associations in Europe, founded in 1990 to support and develop student exchange. ESN is currently present in some 280 higher education institutions in 34 countries. The network is constantly developing and expanding. It operates on three levels: local, national and international mainly on a voluntary basis. (Erasmus Student Network)

ESN works for the creation of a more mobile and flexible education environment by supporting and developing the student exchange at different levels, and providing an intercultural experience also for those students who cannot access a period abroad (internationalization at home). (Erasmus Student Network)

ESN Alumni (<http://alumni.esn.org/>) is a network composed of former regular ESN members, who share the desire to stay involved with ESN. The alumni are mainly acting as a supporting and consultative body next to the network, providing know-how and sometimes financial sponsorship for improving and fastening the creation of a more efficient organization. The mission of ESN Alumni is (ESN Alumni):

- to enable its members to continue enjoying the ESN spirit,
- to help them keep in touch and share their knowledge and experience, and
- to support ESN in fulfilling its mission.

4.5.2 BEST AlumniNet

BEST – Board of European Students of Technology (<http://www.best.eu.org/index.jsp>) is a constantly growing non-profit and non-political organization. Since 1989 it has been providing communication, co-operation

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and exchange possibilities for students all over Europe. **BEST AlumniNet** (<http://www.best.eu.org/alumni/welcome.jsp>) is the alumni association of former BEST members. Local Alumni Groups (LAGs), in turn, are the local alumni associations for the Local BEST Group (LBG) members. (Board of European Students of Technology)

BEST AlumniNet aims to bring former BEST members together and, thus, to help them to keep in touch with friends from the past. The community itself wishes to exchange career-related information and contacts, among other things. In addition, close contact with the alumni plays an important role in the development of the entire network. Sharing experiences and meeting new members are among the actions that will connect the alumni with BEST and make it stronger. (BEST AlumniNet)

5 RECOMMENDATIONS: SETTING UP AN ALUMNI NETWORK

When setting up an (international) alumni network, there are a few fundamental aspects to be taken into account: **(1) strategy**, **(2) target group** and **(3) infrastructure**. (International Alumni Relations) Building network strategy, defining target groups and their needs, as well as developing practical infrastructure are all essential to avoid the early pitfalls, when setting up professionally-run alumni networks. Similar networks / groups set up by the users, in turn, come and go all the time. Therefore, such thorough planning is not necessarily required.

The different concepts of alumni networks (commission driven, institution driven, user driven, student organization driven) also have their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as similarities and differences, which need to be taken into account throughout the process.

Failing to discuss the key issues before embarking on a new alumni program almost guarantees that it will end in failure. Some of the key issues that, in our opinion, are relevant to discuss when setting an alumni network are covered in more detail below. However, it is also crucial to understand that these recommendations are not meant to be absolute, but to help the organizations getting started.

Building a strategy

Despite the program concept, an (international) alumni program always has to be integrated into the organization it involves and present certain advantages to it. Only then will the organization invest in the realization, maintenance and development of the program. It is also worthwhile investigating the organization's strategy. What are the goals, and how can the (international) alumni communication endorse these goals? (International Alumni Relations)

Only after thorough analysis, can the mission, vision and goals of the alumni program be defined. (International) alumni are not primarily interested in the organization or its alumni program for that matter. So it is important to make the alumni membership truly profitable for them. What are the alumni's needs? How can they benefit from the program? (International Alumni Relations)

There are different motives for an organization to start an alumni program. Participants should choose the type of motivation, which suits their organization most (adapted from Sych & Williamson. 2001):

- Exposure of and publicity for the organization
- Program promotion
- Student / staff exchange and recruitment
- Career possibilities
- Information provision
- Postgraduate education
- Feedback

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In most cases, it appears that organizations are driven by a combination of motives. There are also other types of motivation than just the aforementioned. The motives depend on the network concept (commission driven, institution driven, user driven, student organization driven), among other things.

Additionally, it is important to make the organization commit to the (international) alumni program. Cooperation between the alumni office and international liaison office, especially in HE institutions, should neither be underestimated. (International Alumni Relations) The different stakeholders will only remain involved by giving the alumni the services they want and the organizations the information they need: a win-win situation has to be created and maintained.

Creating the extensive alumni database with statistical capacity is often one of the very first projects of the alumni office. Little by little, however, the program can encompass also other (virtual) aspects of the alumni relations including alumni publications, extensive alumni benefits and services portfolio, as well as special events and reunions programs. (Sych & Williamson. 2001)

Target group

When defining the target groups, the key question is: who are the alumni? (International Alumni Relations) Are they a combination of both national and international or just international alumni? Are they mostly located in one country only or spread around the world? Institution driven networks usually have both national and international alumni, which makes the target groups and their needs quite versatile.

Another important question is, whether different strategies for national and international alumni need to be developed. This is most likely, if a HE institution wants to include non-native-language-speakers into its alumni network. In that case, at least a program that can be run in different languages needs to be developed. (International Alumni Relations)

On the other hand, students and alumni are not the only ones these programs concern. There are also other important stakeholders, such as parents and employers, who should be taken into account. Collaboration with different stakeholders is beneficial to both the organization and its alumni.

Infrastructure

And last, but not least: what kind of infrastructure is needed for a successful (international) alumni program? Once the strategy has been developed and the target groups have been identified, it is time to make sure that the different 'practicalities' are in place. These include (adapted from the International Alumni Relations):

- Means of communication
- Data-base
- Professional staff to do the work
- Finance to pay for the program

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- Language(s) used

In virtual associations, infrastructure also plays an important role. The opportunities provided by technological tools are truly significant, but so are the challenges. Virtual associations are more communicative, more responsive, and more attuned to the needs of its members and its profession, but they also require infrastructure that is highly flexible, functional and supports the technology. A virtual association, where members can access services globally and equitably 24/7, also requires constant maintenance and development, as well as monitoring and censorship.

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