

# UNICA Alumni Activities

Report of the survey carried out in December 2021/January 2022  
focusing on Alumni services within UNICA member universities



Network of Universities  
from the Capitals of Europe

## Report UNICA Alumni activities

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	1
About UNICA.....	3
Participation of UNICA member universities in the survey.....	4
UNICA member universities represented.....	4
Average profile represented.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Definition of alumnus/alumna.....	7
<b>UNICA alumni survey</b> .....	<b>9</b>
1. Alumni Relations at UNICA universities.....	9
1.1 UNICA alumni in figures.....	9
1.2 Alumni Services within the university.....	10
1.3 Main objectives.....	12
1.4 Conclusions.....	13
2. Communication, fundraising, data management.....	14
2.1 Communication.....	14
2.2 Funding & activities.....	15
2.3 Alumni data management.....	17
2.4 Conclusions.....	18
3. How can UNICA support alumni activities?.....	19
4. Conclusions.....	21

## About UNICA

UNICA is an institutional **Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe** founded in 1990, currently bringing together **54 member universities from 38 European capitals**. The Network seeks to be a driving force in the development of the European Higher Education and Research Area and to promote academic excellence, integration and cooperation between member universities throughout Europe.

To achieve its aims, UNICA articulates the views of Member Universities to European institutions, to national, regional, and municipal governments, and internationally. It provides the Members with information on European initiatives and programmes and supports them in developing cooperative projects. It offers a forum in which Member Universities can reflect on the latest developments and demands of strategic change in university research, education and administration. In this context, the Network organises member-driven activities, including conferences, seminars, capacity building and skills development workshops and projects. UNICA has currently seven Working Groups, working namely on International Relations, Education, Research, Sustainability, Scholarly communication, Communication and public relations, and collaboration between universities and cities. Each Working Group meets regularly to discuss the strategic areas and priorities and plan its activities.

## Participation of UNICA member universities in the survey

Building meaningful relationships with alumni has become increasingly important for the strategic growth and advancement of universities. In this regard, between December 14<sup>th</sup> 2021 and January 15<sup>th</sup> 2022, UNICA carried out a **survey to understand the priorities and the needs related to alumni services at UNICA member universities.**

The survey has been shared with the contact persons and international relations officers who act as a point of contact between member universities and the Network, with the request to forward it to the personnel responsible for alumni relations.

The survey collected 23 responses from the **20 European universities listed below.**

### UNICA member universities represented

University of Tirana (Albania), Université libre de Bruxelles (Belgium), Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium), University of Zagreb (Croatia), University of Cyprus (Cyprus), Charles University (Czech Republic), Tallinn University (Estonia), Tallinn University of Technology (Estonia), University of Helsinki (Finland), Université Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3 (France), Semmelweis University (Hungary), University of Rome “Tor Vergata” (Italy), Bucharest University of Economic Studies (Romania), University of Ljubljana (Slovenia), Universidad Carlos III de Madrid (Spain), Complutense University of Madrid (Spain), Stockholm University (Sweden), University of Lausanne (Switzerland), King’s College London (United Kingdom), University of Edinburgh (United Kingdom).

### Average profile represented

Most of the respondents are responsible for or employed in the university Alumni Relations offices . A limited number of responses was provided by International Relations officers or Communication employees.

## Introduction

Alumni have become an important resource in the strategic planning of universities. They can act as a bridge between higher education and the job market, support students in their academic and career path, help their *alma mater* achieving financial targets, and stand with universities in the development of their mission. But beyond being a valuable resource, management of alumni relations is also a necessary one. In fact, in the last 30 years, funding models for universities have become more rigorous in exchange for more independence from governments<sup>1</sup>, which has led universities to seek alternative sources of funding.

In addition, enrolment in universities programmes is quickly decreasing due to low birth rates and unemployment<sup>2</sup>. On top of these, to serve the needs of the global, digital, and knowledge economy, traditional models of teaching and learning in universities are competing with new providers and tools, which are profoundly transforming the higher education setting<sup>3</sup>.

To sum up, the contemporary setting of universities has urged them to adopt innovative sources of funding and to reaffirm their role as reputable and distinguished institutions. Alumni relations are one of the tools that are contributing to that mission. Many studies have been conducted in this topic, analysing the added value of establishing strong and long-lasting relationship with alumni, who can contribute **to reaffirming the excellence of universities in many ways**<sup>4</sup>.

Alumni Relations is an important topic of discussion for UNICA which, after some previous activities on this topic in the past, decided to resume its activities in this field. The first step was the webinar the webinar “Global Alumni Relations and models of alumni services &

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<sup>1</sup> European Review, Vol. 26, No. S1, S48–S56 © 2018 Academia Europaea. doi:10.1017/S1062798717000539

<sup>2</sup> Wu, Shu-Jing, et al. “Detecting the Issue of Higher Education Over-Expanded Under Declining Enrollment Times.” Higher Education Policy, vol. 34, no. 4, Dec. 2021, pp. 747–70, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-019-00163-z>.

<sup>3</sup> “The Future of Higher Ed Is Occurring at the Margins.” Inside Higher Ed, 4 Oct. 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/10/04/higher-education-should-prepare-five-new-realities-opinion>.

<sup>4</sup> “Why Alumni Are Important for Higher Ed Institutions.” Signal Vine, 3 Feb. 2020, <https://www.signalvine.com/alumni/why-alumni-are-important-for-higher-ed-institutions>.

engagement as a strategic task of Higher Education Institutions”<sup>5</sup>. The online event, organised in collaboration with the [SGroup](#), took place in September 2021 and brought to debate challenges and opportunities that universities face in this area.

To get a more comprehensive idea of the management of Alumni Relations at UNICA universities, of the challenges they encounter, and of the needs and expectations towards future activities, UNICA carried out a survey from December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021, to January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

The aim of this report is to **present the results of the survey** and understand the priorities of UNICA members in this area. The final objective is to create a UNICA working group focused on this topic and promote activities offering the opportunity to share good practices, experiences and challenges to improve alumni services analysed and improved within universities.

Understanding the complexity of university services and given the objectives of this first action, the survey was built with the mindset of not being exhaustive, but rather focused on general questions that would allow to draw a picture of the main common features that tie together different offices under the umbrella name of “Alumni Relations Services”.

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<sup>5</sup> UNICA – SGroup Webinar: Global Alumni Relations and Models of Alumni Services & Engagement as a Strategic Task of HEIs | 14 September 2021 | UNICA. <https://www.unica-network.eu/event/sgroup-unica-webinar-on-global-alumni-relations-and-services/>. Accessed 14 Feb. 2022.

## Definition of alumnus/alumna

Before digging into the survey results, it is important to clarify the definition of “alumnus/alumna”. It can be agreed that alumnus or alumna is a former student who graduated in a certain college/university. However, a review of the way the term is used at different universities demonstrates that there is not full consensus about this definition and shows that the concept may be flexible and include students who attended without graduating (withdrawing students, visiting students in the context of mobility schemes, etc).

For instance, the University of Edinburgh associates the community of alumni with graduation<sup>6</sup>, but in some cases the term ‘alumni’ may also refer to a different group, such as in the ‘Alumni (Visiting Undergraduate) Scholarship Scheme’<sup>7</sup>.

The University of Ljubljana has a very clear concept of the term, associating it directly to the completion of a course: *“An alumnus/alumna of the University of Ljubljana is anyone who completed a course of study at any of the member institutions of the University of Ljubljana and who received an official certificate thereof from the university. This holds for anyone, no matter the year, the name of the study programme and the level of the degree obtained”*<sup>8</sup>. The university does reserve, however, the right to exceptions, introducing for such cases the term “almost alumni”: *“Although UL alumni are those who have completed a study programme at the University of Ljubljana, we occasionally make an exception to this rule. The almost UL alumni are those who have not yet completed their studies but who have achieved exceptional results in their fields.”*<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> “Global Community.” The University of Edinburgh, <https://www.ed.ac.uk/alumni/services/community>. Accessed 16 Feb. 2022.

<sup>7</sup> “Tuition Fee Alumni Scholarships.” The University of Edinburgh, <https://www.ed.ac.uk/student-funding/postgraduate/alumni-scholarships>. Accessed 16 Feb. 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Ljubljani, Univerza v. FAQ - University of Ljubljana. [https://www.uni-lj.si/alumni\\_en/faq/](https://www.uni-lj.si/alumni_en/faq/). Accessed 16 Feb. 2022.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*

Though respondents were not asked to have in mind a specific concept of alumni, UNICA would like to call the attention to Dellarocas' thinking of the original meaning of "alumnus/alumna". The author considers the alumnus/alumna as a foster child, as a student in constant and lifelong need of her/his university<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Chris Dellarocas, Higher Education in a World Where Students Never Graduate. Published by Inside Higher Ed, August 1, 2018. <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/views/2018/08/01/role-university-world-where-students-never-graduate-opinion>

## UNICA alumni survey

The survey was organised in three sections: the first part concerned the actors (e.g. the offices) and the audience (the alumni), and the respective objectives of the relation. The second part focuses on the management of that relationship, i.e. how the services communicate with alumni and how they manage information. The third part is dedicated to the priorities and expectations that will drive UNICA to support the concretisation of a shared community in Alumni Relations.

### 1. Alumni Relations at UNICA universities

#### 1.1 UNICA alumni in figures

UNICA gathers both old and young universities. Observing the quorum of respondents, 14 institutions are more than 100 years old and 7 are younger universities (less than 65 years old), hence it's not surprising that most respondents have reported having more than 10.000 alumni (82.6%), as shown in figure 1.

How many Alumni are there in your institution?  
23 responses

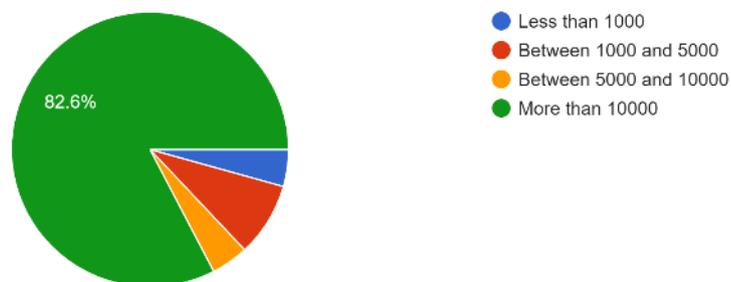


Figure 1: Number of alumni

However, it can be also be observed that figures are much lower when it comes to the contact with the alumni: less than 20% or between 20% and 50% of the total number of alumni

reported. Only 9% reported having contact with more than 70% of the total of alumni (figure 2).

Out of the total number of Alumni in your university, with what percentage do you have contact with?  
23 responses

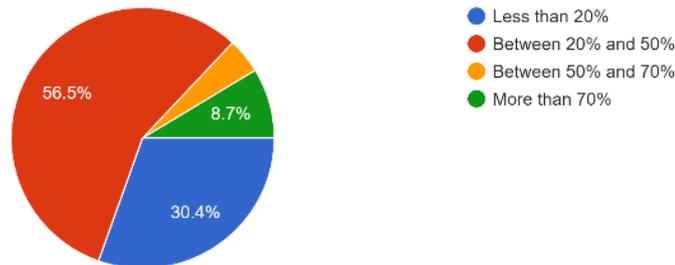


Figure 2: Contact with alumni

Alumni Relations offices and services started to be developed when universities were faced with the need to diversify their income following the cuts in governmental funding of Higher Education due to the recession in 2008 and a decrease in enrollments because of low birth rates among Gen Z<sup>11</sup>. If universities only started actively collecting and managing data of their alumni around this time, digital records are still recent if compared to the number of years in which most universities have been operating.

### 1.2 Alumni Services within the university

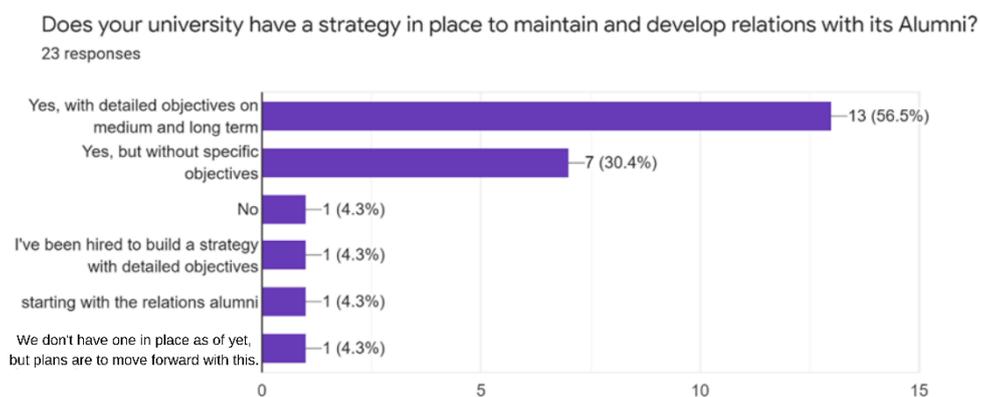


Figure 3: Information on strategies in place to maintain and develop Alumni Relations

<sup>11</sup> "Why Alumni Are Important for Higher Ed Institutions." Signal Vine, 3 Feb. 2020, <https://www.signalvine.com/alumni/why-alumni-are-important-for-higher-ed-institutions>.

Most of the universities represented in the survey already have a **strategy to maintain and develop relations with alumni**: 56.5% among them have detailed objectives on the medium-long term; this is followed by a group of universities who declare having a plan, but not clear objectives (30,4%); a smaller group of universities (%???) declare that they have recently put efforts (or are about to do so) to develop a detailed plan (figure 3).

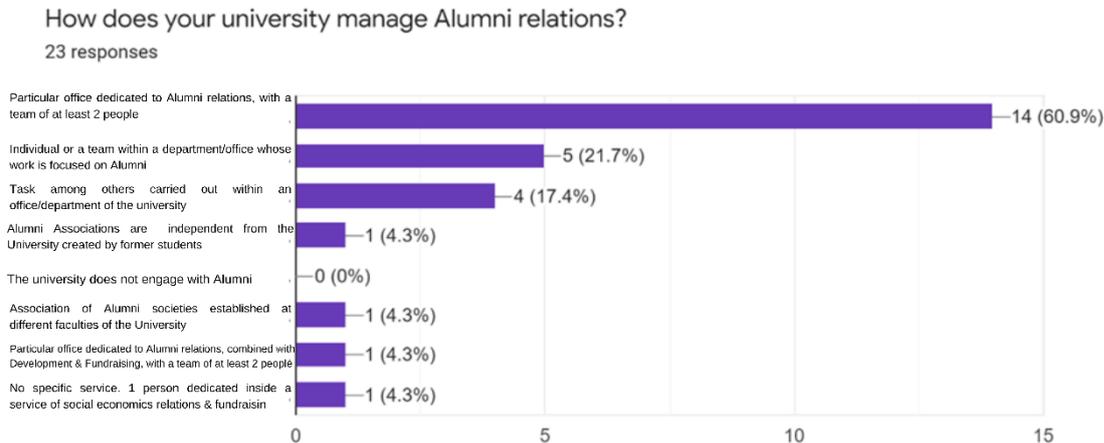


Figure 4: Structures in place for the management of Alumni Relations

Most of the respondents declare the presence of a specific/devoted office with a team of at least two people who are responsible for Alumni Relations (60,9%, as seen in figure 4). However, at other institutions represented in the survey human resources are limited to a single person or are shared for other tasks.

Management of Alumni Relations is often **associated with other areas**, in some cases being a domain that falls under the umbrella of larger departments, such as communication and fundraising. This circumstance provides an insight into the purpose of Alumni Relations services: they seem to act as a driver for the development of university activities. This is corroborated by the responses concerning the mains objectives of Alumni Services, analysed in the next section.

Overall, the results suggest that Alumni Relations is a subject that universities have in their agenda and seems to be **increasingly becoming a priority**.

### 1.3 Main objectives

What are your university's main objectives for maintaining and developing relations with Alumni?  
 (Choose maximum 2)  
 23 responses

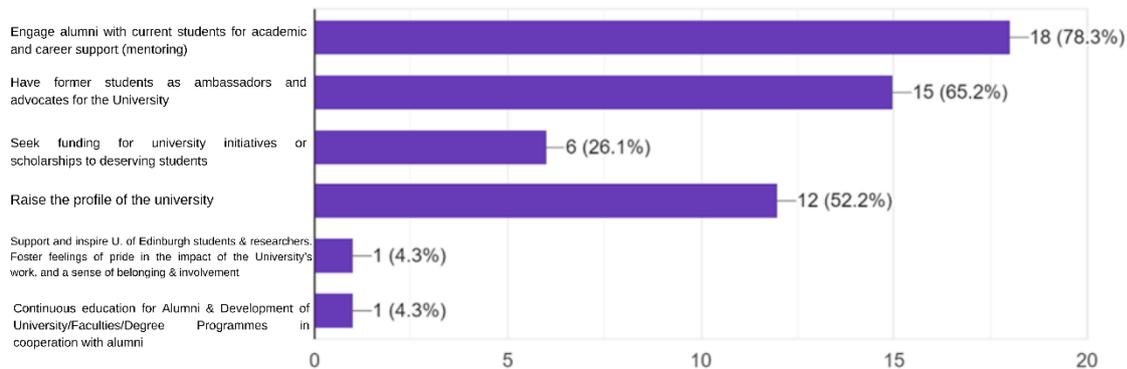


Figure 5: Main objectives of Alumni Relations at UNICA member universities

The responses to the question about the main objectives of the Alumni Relations strategy confirm the idea that **the relationship with former students serves other university services**. Universities seem to be especially interested in bridging former to current students for the purposes of career and academic support, a practice commonly known as mentoring (78,3%, as seen in figure 5). Promotion of the university is also among the top reasons, either for the purpose of recruitment through ambassadors (65,2%) or to raise the profile of the university (52,2%).

With universities operating in a competitive environment, which is in part fuelled by rankings, it is not surprising that universities are reaching out to their former students for reasons that have to do with reputation. In fact, there are quite a few rankings that bring alumni into the equation when it comes to the evaluation of institutions<sup>12</sup>: [QS Graduate Employability Rankings](#), the [World University Rankings \(CWUR\)](#), the [Times Higher Education World Reputation Rankings](#), or even the European born ranking [U-Multirank](#).

Finally, funding for university activities or scholarships is also among the objectives to connect with former students (26,1%). It is not, however, on the top objectives, which might be explained by the fact that seeking funds through alumni seems to be, to a certain extent, a

<sup>12</sup> Europe, CASE. "Alumni Relations & Reputation." Medium, 3 Sept. 2019, [https://medium.com/@CASE\\_Europe/alumni-relations-reputation-747a67b2fb56](https://medium.com/@CASE_Europe/alumni-relations-reputation-747a67b2fb56).

recent trend in European universities<sup>13</sup>. It seems that European universities are still reluctant to implement a culture of “giving” among alumni, which might find its explanation in the fact that European Higher Education is free (or virtually free) as taxpayers absorb that cost<sup>14</sup>. Implementing a philanthropic narrative might prove difficult to do, but it would certainly be interesting to find projects among UNICA members that have been funded by alumni and promote a discussion on this topic.

#### 1.4 Conclusions

Responding universities are setting a strategy to improve and develop the relation with former students. In this regard, they declare the presence of an office or employees in charge of developing the strategy and the relation with alumni. In a logic of **considering employability as a part of a university’s mission**<sup>15</sup>, the respondents think that alumni could help other students start their career and gain experience in their study domains, but also become **ambassadors of the university and be a source of funds for university activities**. Alumni are at the centre of a spatial and temporal crossroads. They bridge the institution’s past and future as well as the academic arena to the labour market. Universities benefit from the relationship with former students by getting access to industry, market, and public services, which act as a source of employment for current students, funding, and collaborative opportunities for the purpose of research and innovation.

The next section will focus on communication with alumni, funds dedicated to alumni activities, and data management.

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<sup>13</sup> Korn, Melissa. “European Business Schools Get in the Fundraising Game.” Wall Street Journal, 1 Jan. 2014, <https://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304773104579268193196882358.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Jackson, Abby. “‘Free’ College in Europe Isn’t Really Free.” Business Insider, <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-do-european-countries-afford-free-college-2017-4>. Accessed 15 Mar. 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Publications. <https://eua.eu/resources/publications/962:meeting-skills-and-employability-demands.html>. Accessed 4 Feb. 2022.

## 2. Communication, fundraising, data management

### 2.1 Communication

In the second section, the survey focused on the communication tools used to communicate with alumni. The responses show that **informal communication is the most prevalent**, with social media networks leading the preferred communication channels, followed by e-mail and then newsletters. It is worth noting that half of the respondents reports having a specific alumni management software (figure 6).

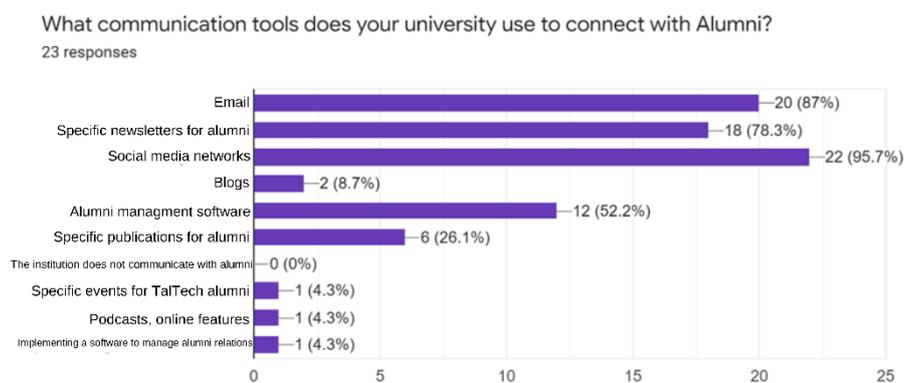


Figure 6: Communication tools used to communicate with alumni

On the other hand, print publications are not among the most preferred tools to communicate with alumni. It would be interesting to understand if this reflects the greening and digitalised policies adopted by universities. Communicating with alumni by print publications could also face logistic limits, such as the access and updating of home addresses, or the missing presence of the alumni in the campus.

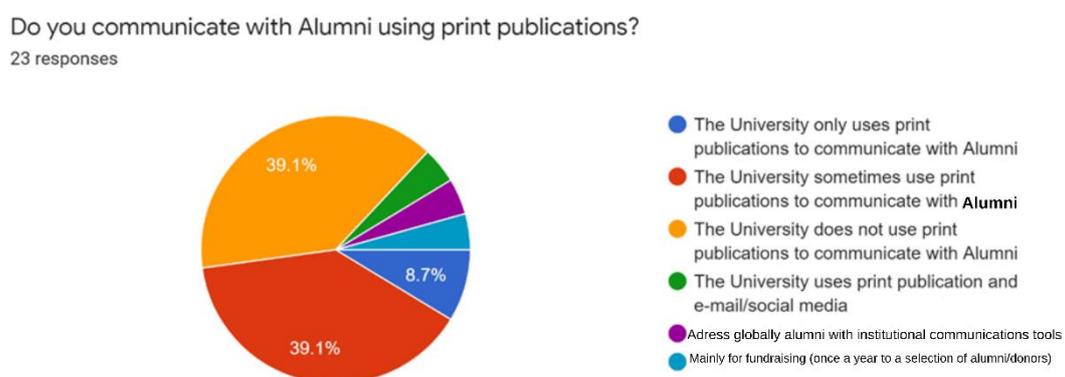


Figure 7: Use of print publications

For its own nature, UNICA is interested in the European and international dimension of the cooperation between universities and alumni. For this reason, the survey asked the respondents if their universities collaborate with **alumni chapters** (figure 8). These associations are groups of alumni around the world who represent the university internationally<sup>16</sup>.

Does your university collaborate with Alumni Chapters (regional representations of Alumni)?  
23 responses

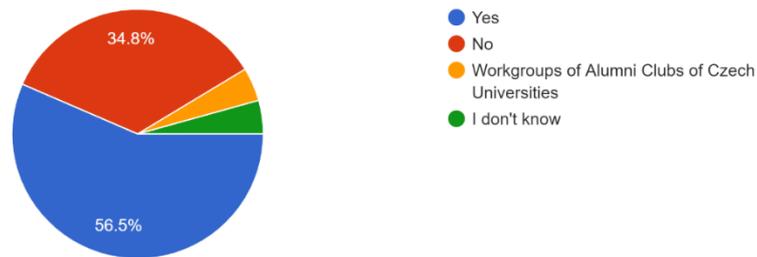


Figure 8: Collaboration with alumni chapters

It would be interesting to further explore the added value of this strategy and the process to set it up. Despite most of the respondents replied positively to this question, it would also be noteworthy to inquiry on the reasons why 34,8% of respondents are not collaborating with their international alumni through chapters.

## 2.2 Funding & activities

In this section, “funding” shall be intended as the financial resources ensuring that the office responsible for alumni can carry out activities to meet its objectives and not in the sense of fundraising as an objective.

<sup>16</sup> “Chapters.” Universiteit Gent, <https://www.ugent.be/alumnus/en/chapters>. Accessed 7 Feb. 2022.

### How are the Alumni activities financed?

23 responses

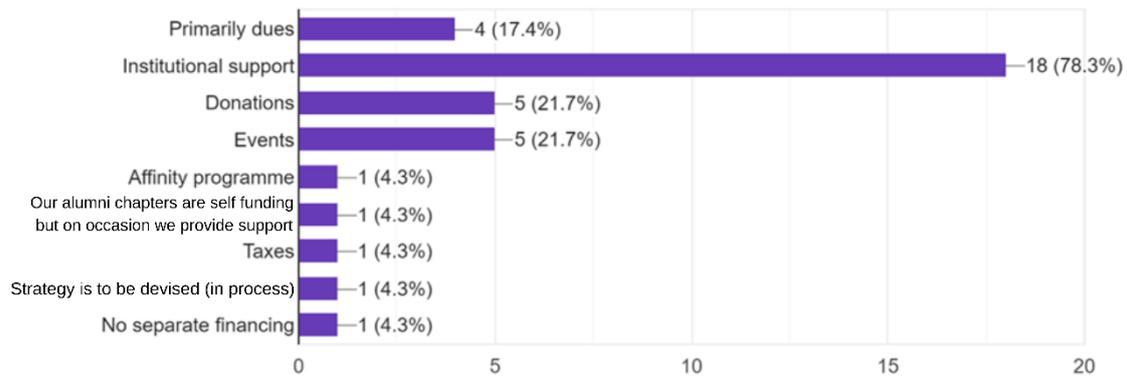


Figure 9: Funding of alumni activities

Most respondents can count **on institutional support to fund the alumni activities**. The allocation of a budget for these activities confirms the universities' recognition of the potential of alumni. However, it would be worth to dig deeper into the subject and know more about the percentage of the university's total budget allocated for alumni activities, and if the budget allocated is perceived as sufficient to implement the plans of Alumni Relations teams. On the other hand, donations and organization of events are not a relevant source of funding.

In order to establish cooperation among the staff in charge of alumni at UNICA members, it is important to understand which tasks are carried out by Alumni services. The question about the tasks required an open answer and respondents' answers are reported below, grouped in different categories, in order of importance:

1. Organisation of meetings and networking **events** (both formal and informal) – 56% of respondents
2. Organisation of workshops, seminars, lectures, panel **discussions** – 52% of respondents
3. Management of tools, **initiatives** for alumni (podcasts, alumni of the year, competitions, etc.) – 52% of respondents
4. Management of **mentoring** programmes – 39% of respondents
5. Establishing contacts for the purpose of fairs (**career** days, job fairs, going abroad fairs etc.) – 30% of respondents

6. **Communication** on university activities through social media channels, emails – 21% of respondents
7. Alumni search, **surveys** – 13% of respondents
8. Publications – 8% of respondents
9. **Fundraising** – 8% of respondents
10. Guaranteeing the use of university services (library, etc.) – 8% of respondents
11. Nothing systematic – 4% of respondents

As it can be observed, first and foremost, universities invest in the organisation of informal activities to reach out to their former students, followed by the involvement of alumni in university activities, as workshops and discussion panels.

As the relationship between the offices and alumni relies considerably on communication, working to maintain an active interaction is also among the main tasks. This is followed by mentoring and getting former students involved in activities like career and mobility fairs.

The reported tasks confirm the objectives mentioned by the universities in the first section of the survey.

### 2.3 Alumni data management

To assure a good communication among universities and alumni, building a performant data collection system is extremely important. It is interesting to see the most preferred systems in this regard (figure 10).

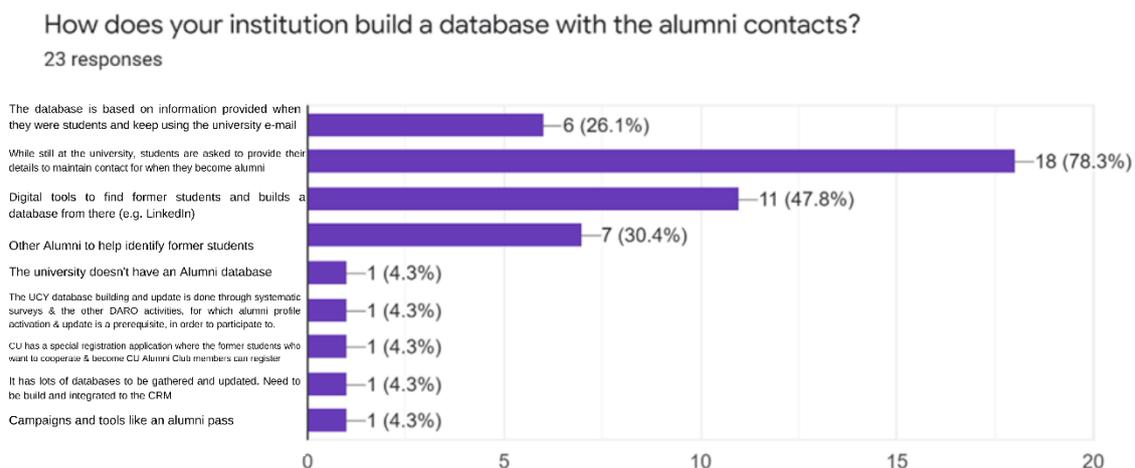


Figure 10: Database of alumni

A large part of the universities collects details of future alumni in a database in advance, while they are still students. 18 respondents declare that, while still at the university, students are asked to provide their details (including personal contacts) specifically for the purpose of maintaining contact after graduation. This also shows the **interest of students in maintaining a relation with their universities**. It is also interesting to observe that the use of tools such as LinkedIn is common as well, and that other alumni seem to be a good source of contacts to increase the database (figure 10). Data management is also important to understand how universities **reach out to elder students, who graduated longer ago**. Good practices and experiences in this regard, especially concerning the added value of such contacts compared to the others, could be a topic of interest for future UNICA meetings on alumni relations.

Managing personal data and possible issues with data protection are another crucial element in Alumni Relations. The responses to the open question “How does your institution comply with **GDPR?**”, do not seem to consider GDPR as a problem: most of the institutions represented are GDPR compliant and are supported by the institutional legal department/privacy advisor.

## 2.4 Conclusions

The second part of the survey highlighted that universities dedicate a part of their budget to alumni activities and are trying to improve and **update their communication strategies** to reach out to their alumni. This shows that Alumni Relations are becoming a growing priority in universities’ agendas. Alumni Relations is an area that highly benefits from the digital era, with many universities capitalising on social media platforms to connect and interact with their former students. This is also confirmed by the fact that **digitalised communication is preferred to the print publications**. To establish and maintain a relation with their alumni, universities build **databases** directly asking the students for their contacts, however new tools are being used such as social media networks. Evidence also suggests that establishing a relationship with alumni starts with an informal approach through networking activities, which then evolves to a more structured and formal involvement in the university's activities and objectives.

Half of the respondents keeps an active relation with alumni chapters, proving **alumni collaboration to have an international aspect**.

### 3. How can UNICA support alumni activities?

This section focuses on the role of UNICA, bearing in mind its unique feature i.e. being a network of universities based in capital cities, in sharing good practices and experiences related to alumni services and creating collaboration among alumni offices.

UNICA’s main activities are the result of a collaboration within seven different working groups, namely:

- ❖ [International Relations Officers](#)
- ❖ [UNICA EduLAB](#)
- ❖ [UNICA Research](#)
- ❖ [UNICA Green & SDGs](#)
- ❖ [Scholarly Communication](#)
- ❖ [UNICA & the City](#)
- ❖ [University PR & Communication](#)

Because of **UNICA’s expertise in organising focus groups to create a meaningful collaboration among its members**, one of the main purposes of the survey was to understand if alumni officers would be eager to engage in a UNICA sub-group for Alumni Relations, which would be under the umbrella of the University PR & Communication group. For this reason, the survey asked the respondents:

Would you be interested in being involved in a UNICA subgroup that focuses on activities regarding Alumni relations?  
23 responses

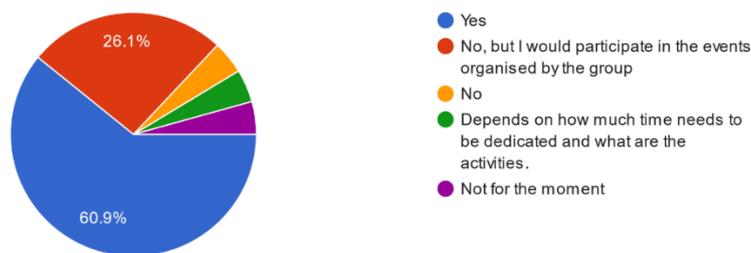


Figure 11: Interest in taking part in UNICA activities on Alumni Relations

Most of the respondents replied positively and a large part would be interested in joining the events which might be organised by the group (figure 11). Moreover, the responses also allow for some optimism about the potential of the group to grow and further strengthen cooperation in the future. The analysis of the replies to the survey also allow to identify the topics listed below, in which respondents would like to engage with peers from other UNICA member universities:

-  Alumni strategies
-  Alumni activities
-  Data management
-  International chapters
-  Communication and networking platforms
-  Funding for management of Alumni Relations
-  Mentoring

Respondents would like to share and learn about strategies to retain and create a good relationship with alumni.

It is interesting to note that some of the above-mentioned priorities are addressed by the University PR & Communication group. In that sense, Alumni Relations officers can benefit from the expertise of the colleagues who have been involved in UNICA activities for a longer period.

## 4. Conclusions

Counting on alumni support has become a priority for universities. Alumni can act as a bridge between students and outside professional world, they can share their experience and become mentors. They can also promote their universities, becoming ambassadors of its quality and offer. Lastly, alumni can become a source of funding for other universities' initiatives. The fact that Alumni relations are a growing priority for UNICA member universities is also proven by the increasing institutional support to these activities, which are mainly funded through the university's budget.

This report aimed at analysing the strategy used by UNICA member universities in addressing Alumni Relations. Despite the high number of alumni, many universities struggle to maintain the contact and build a strong relation with their alumni. This may suggest that universities should improve the data management related to alumni, communication strategies used to reach out alumni, and organise dynamic and interesting activities and improve their promotion to attract the former students.

UNICA believes that the discussion and exchange among universities from different European countries would encourage peer learning, sharing of good practices and of viable solutions to face the challenges in this domain. Following the survey, UNICA set up a sub-group (under the UNICA University PR & Communication working group) to promote the discussions and help UNICA members adopt better strategies to attract alumni.

Throughout the reporting, a few questions to be further explored were pointed out. Below is a recap of such questions, which might set the basis for the organisation of the first activities of the sub-group:

-  Who is an alumnus/alumna and what criteria qualify an alumnus/alumna?
-  Are European universities reluctant to ask alumni for funds?
-  Are there projects at UNICA universities that were financed by alumni? How was the process carried out and what was the perception?
-  What is the added benefit of alumni chapters? How to set them up?
-  How does university leadership perceive alumni relations?

- 🎓 What is the added value of connecting to elder alumni?
- 🎓 What are the different strategies to connect with alumni and how to determine the best to implement?

If your university is a UNICA member and you would like to participate in the discussions of the sub-group and promote events to share the good practices at your institution, do not hesitate to reach out the UNICA Secretariat at [office@unica-network.eu](mailto:office@unica-network.eu)

“Together” is a great way to build, maintain and move the University community further...  
Let’s share, learn, and add value to create a sustainable and long-lasting relation with alumni!