



Partners for Life: Unlocking the Strategic Value of Alumni for Universities

Conference Report from the UNICA
Alumni Relations Seminar 2025

March 2026



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Context and Background	4
Introductory Session	6
Session 1	
FROM GRADUATES TO GLOBAL ADVOCATES: THE POWER OF ALUMNI	8
Session 2	
DESIGNING ALUMNI COMMUNITIES: GOVERNANCE, STRATEGY, AND CONNECTION	11
Session 3	
ALUMNI RELATIONS IN PRACTICE: INSIGHTS FROM THE UNICA NETWORK	13
Session 4	
CHANGE MANAGEMENT & ALUMNI CONNECTIONS. PARADIGM SHIFT	15
Conclusion and Outlook	18
Beyond the Report	19

Context and Background



Alumni should not be seen as former students but as lifelong partners. ”

Rachel Bray, Head of CERN Alumni Relations

Alumni relations are not a ceremonial endeavour, they **are a strategic necessity**. For universities in Europe, investing in alumni engagement offers a powerful way to extend institutional impact, reinforce values, and build sustainable communities of knowledge, across generations and borders.

With growing global competition, evolving labour markets, shifting funding landscapes, as well as the growing popularity of new educational providers and skill-building models, **European universities are under pressure** to demonstrate their relevance, sustainability, and societal impact. If, on one side, universities need to look inward and creatively rethink about pedagogical approaches, **they must also look outward - to their communities** - and seize the opportunities these connections offer. And alumni are a powerful resource to that endeavour.

The topic of Alumni Relations has been addressed at UNICA in different occasions, starting in January 2009, with a workshop on UNICA Strategies for International Alumni Work at Freie Universität Berlin. More recently, **in 2022, UNICA published a report on Alumni Services** at its member universities.

This report presents the conclusions of a survey which looked into the priorities and the needs related to alumni services at 20 UNICA member universities.

Learn more

[UNICA Alumni Activities: Survey report on Alumni Services within member universities](#)



The survey showed that most of the universities represented in the survey already have a strategy to maintain and develop relations with alumni, with 56.5% having detailed objectives on the medium-long term.

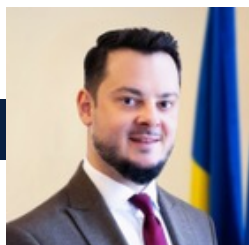
It also showed that management of Alumni Relations is often associated with other areas, in some cases being a domain that falls under the umbrella of larger departments, such as communication and fundraising. Another point worth stressing is that **alumni collaboration has a strong international dimension**. These conclusions highlight the strong potential for creating synergies on this topic, fostering the exchange of know-how and best practices among member universities, and strengthening connections with actors and organisations that hold expertise in this area.

Therefore, **UNICA was very pleased to resume its activities** in the area of Alumni Relations following the initiative of the **Bucharest University of Economics Studies (ASE)**. To kick off this renewed focus, ASE hosted the UNICA Alumni Relations Seminar **“Partners for Life: Unlocking the Strategic Value of Alumni for Universities”**, on 11-12 November 2025, which explored the strategic value of alumni engagement.

The meeting brought together representatives from universities, alumni associations, EU programmes, and related sectors to explore how to strengthen and innovate in this area. The two-day programme moved from strategic reflection to practical application, offering participants a comprehensive view of the role of alumni in university development and engagement. Through a combination of discussions, case studies, and a practical workshop, the meeting encouraged participants to consider **alumni relations not only as a communication function, but as an integral part of institutional development and internationalisation**.

This short report presents the main conclusions from each session, serving both as a record of the discussions and as a foundation for future activities in the field of Alumni Relations. On the final chapter, besides the main conclusions, you will find a set of “actionable ways forward”, this is, practical implementation measures that UNICA can consider to continue exploring the theme of Alumni Relations.

Introductory Session



Ioan-Radu PETRARIU
Dean of Faculty of
International Business and
Economics, ASE and Secretary-
General of Alumni ASE



Luciano SASO
Secretary General,
UNICA

[Ioan-Radu Petrariu \(Faculty of International Business and Economics, ASE\)](#), opened the event with a welcome speech where he highlighted the strategic importance of fostering strong **alumni relations as a cornerstone of academic communities**. In this regard, he showcased the example of the Faculty of International Business and Economics, where sustained efforts have built an active and committed alumni community that continues to contribute to the faculty's international outlook and professional relevance.

[Prof. Luciano Saso \(UNICA\)](#), continued the conversation by posing the essential question that underpins all debates on alumni relations: **how should we define an “alumnus” or “alumna”?** He also noted that, although universities often aspire to maintain strong connections with all their former students, many lack the capacity to do so. The approach to alumni relations tends to depend heavily on institutional resources and the commitment of their leadership.



Who are the alumni?

It is generally accepted that alumni refers to former students who graduated.

However, a review of how the term is used across different institutions reveals a lack of full consensus around this definition. In practice, the concept is often applied more flexibly, sometimes encompassing individuals who attended without graduating - such as students who withdrew or visiting students participating in mobility programmes - or even staff members.

He then highlighted that UNICA can play an important role in this area by facilitating connections among its member universities, supporting the sharing of practices, and helping institutions scale up their alumni efforts.

Drawing on the findings of the recent UNICA Report on Alumni Relations, he outlined key challenges associated with this area. These include the need for clear and effective governance structures to coordinate alumni activities across increasingly complex institutions (for instance, decentralised universities structures), as well as the financial and human resource burden associated with maintaining long-term engagement.

He also pointed to the ongoing difficulty of managing and integrating alumni databases in a coherent and GDPR-compliant way, while acknowledging the significant opportunities created by digital transformation, particularly in terms of communication, data analysis, and community-building across borders.

Finally, he stressed the growing relevance of alumni engagement within the broader context of European higher education reforms, where alumni are increasingly seen as key stakeholders in strengthening universities' societal impact, employability agendas, and lifelong learning missions.

Session 1

From Graduates to Global Advocates: The Power of Alumni

Panel with Presentations

Chair: Rachel BRAY, Head Alumni Relations, CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research



Costin CIORA

Professor, Bucharest
University of Economic
Studies



Nena GRCEVA

Director Alumni Affairs,
Hertie School, The University
of Governance in Berlin

Rachel Bray, Head of CERN Alumni Relations at CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, expanded on the idea that **alumni should not be seen as former students but as lifelong partners**. She described alumni as an institution's "best friends", carrying with them embedded institutional memory and a deep understanding of the organisational culture. Their potential contribution goes far beyond financial support: they help strengthen reputation, support mission-driven initiatives, and act as authentic ambassadors of their institutions. Rachel emphasised that **alumni engagement begins on the very first day** students enter the university and continues throughout their professional lives. At CERN, this definition also extends to former staff. She stressed the importance of **aligning alumni activities with institutional goals**, measuring the impact of engagement activities, and fostering strong collaboration between alumni teams, leadership, HR departments, and communications units. Ultimately, alumni relations should be understood as a strategic and relational exercise rather than a transactional one.



[Learn more](#)
[CERN Alumni Network](#)

Costin Ciora (ASE) brought a long-term historical perspective by presenting his university's 105 years of experience in engaging its alumni community. Although the university's alumni work was interrupted during the communist period, it regained momentum in 2007 and has since developed a comprehensive model.

Costin described alumni relations as both a matter of relationship-building and a form of “sales”, with activities that extend far beyond occasional events or sponsorship programmes. His institution’s five-star model describes in a clear way the contributions of alumni for the university:

- **Education:** Alumni contribute to teaching, curriculum development, case studies, and class materials;
- **Research:** Strong focus on applied research projects with alumni partners;
- **Infrastructure:** Alumni in key positions can support university infrastructure, especially where funding is complex;
- **Career Development:** Structured support through dedicated platforms and offices;
- **Community:** Alumni-led communities, including MBA networks and podcasts (e.g., The Expert Hour).

Faced with demographic decline and a shrinking student population, Costin highlighted the importance of engaging international alumni and mapping alumni profiles to better understand how to involve them across the different areas of the model.



[Learn more](#)

[ASE Alumni International Club](#)

Their ambassador programme, for instance, aims to stimulate collaboration through a four-step process: connecting, collaborating, advocating, and amplifying.

[Nena Grceva \(Hertie School of The University of Governance in Berlin\)](#) concluded the panel with a reminder that successful alumni engagement depends on understanding the motivations and needs of alumni themselves. She stressed that alumni relations should not be the responsibility of a single office but rather a horizontal and multistakeholder effort. Since alumni are not in frequent contact with their institution, effective communication becomes both a challenge and a priority. Nena emphasised the value of **identifying good practices and tools that can ease the workload** and help institutions develop sustainable, impactful alumni strategies.

During the Q&A, participants discussed the limitations of relying solely on platforms such as LinkedIn, which does not provide the necessary data and carries risks such as impersonation. CERN’s choice to use a dedicated alumni platform ([Hivebrite](#)) was presented as one solution. The conversation also touched on engagement and branding strategies, the possibility of a cultural shift toward philanthropy in Europe, and the importance of focusing on **participation and emotional connection rather than large donations**.



Speakers agreed that many alumni genuinely want to give back, and that meaningful engagement is best nurtured through personal interactions rather than purely database-driven approaches.

Learn more
[Hertie School Alumni](#)

Overall, the session underscored that alumni relations are becoming an increasingly critical dimension of university strategy. Institutions that invest in relational, long-term, and value-driven approaches are more likely to build strong, committed, and mutually beneficial alumni communities.

Session 2

Designing Alumni Communities: Governance, Strategy, and Connection

Panel Discussion

Chair: Anamaria HOLOTA, Alumni Relations & Partnerships Specialist, Alumni ASE, Bucharest University of Economics Studies, ASE



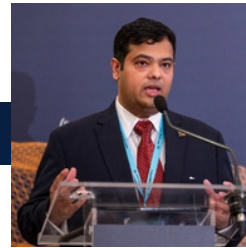
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After a first session that established the pivotal role of alumni, Session 2 brought together actors with different institutional perspectives for a debate that aimed to explore the topic from different angles, namely the experience of a Research Centre (CERN), a university (University of Alcalá), an international master's programme (Erasmus Mundus Alumni Association, EMA), an international researchers' programme (the Marie Curie Alumni Association, MCAA), and of an alumni of the host institution, now working in the corporate world as a partner at PwC, representing also the industry perspective.

[Rachel Bray \(CERN\)](#) detailed how a research institution can maintain engagement through creative recognition and targeted communication. She shared the evolution of CERN's "badge system," explaining that while initial humorous attempts like the "neutrino" badge did not resonate, a physical recognition system for "CAN-doers" successfully sustained engagement. Bray emphasized the importance of **knowing the audience and "speaking their language"** - whether that be English, French, or Physics - to ensure that alumni see the personal benefit in interacting with the organization.



[Eva Senra \(University of Alcalá\)](#) focused on the necessity of fostering engagement from the very beginning of the student journey. She argued that for a university, alumni relations must be rooted in "campus life," ensuring that students feel a sense of belonging and connection while they are still undergraduates. This early immersion creates a natural transition from student to alumnus, making later engagement efforts more effective and organic.

Learn more

[Alumni UAH](#)



[Luís Rodríguez \(Erasmus Mundus Students & Alumni Association\)](#) highlighted the unique challenges of managing a global, volunteer-based NGO. Unlike student-run organizations like ESN, EMA relies entirely on the donated time of its members, which makes maintaining continuity difficult, especially during board transitions. To overcome these hurdles, EMA utilizes platforms that alumni already use daily, such as WhatsApp and LinkedIn, and works to systematically store institutional know-how to fill gaps during leadership changes.

Learn more

[EMA: The Erasmus Mundus Students and Alumni Association](#)

[Ionuț Simion \(PwC\)](#) provided a perspective from both a corporate partner and a devoted alumnus, describing the university as a "house of dreams" where shared memories and the influence of teachers create lasting bonds. He shared how he expanded alumni engagement within PwC by connecting hundreds of colleagues who shared the same academic background, noting that their common history allowed them to bond instantly. Simion underscored the value of formal university-industry agreements, such as the partnership between ASE and PwC, which provides students with leadership training while securing a pipeline of competent professionals for the industry.



[Mostafa Moonir Shawrav \(Marie Curie Alumni Association - MCAA\)](#) discussed the importance of providing a platform that supports researchers across all career paths, not just within academia. He noted that because there is "no single recipe" for engagement, it is crucial to listen to members and tailor services to their specific fields and professional needs. By preparing researchers for roles in industry and other sectors, MCAA ensures its network remains relevant and valuable to its 23,000+ global members. He introduced specialized digital tools like the PEP-CV (Peer Exchange Platform for Narrative-style CVs) and the MCAA Academy mentoring program, which are designed to support researchers at all career stages. He emphasized that their strategy is centred on preparing researchers not just for academic success, but for impactful careers in industry and other diverse sectors.

Learn more

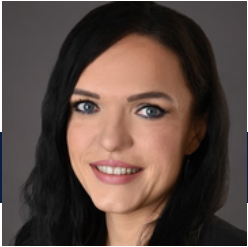
[Marie Curie Alumni Association](#)

Session 3

Alumni Relations in Practice: Insights from the UNICA Network

Study cases

Chair: Luciano Saso, Secretary-General of UNICA



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Officer, University
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**Aurore
SPEDICATO**
Alumni Loyalty
Program Project
Manager, PSL
University

Building on the practical debates of the second session, Session 3 offered an in-depth look at how various members of the UNICA network implement alumni strategies within their unique institutional frameworks.

[Maja Dizdarević \(University of Ljubljana\)](#) presented a highly structured, decentralized model for a large national university. With over 33,500 alumni and 65 distinct clubs, the University of Ljubljana operates a hybrid system where the central Rectorate manages data and training while 23 faculties and 3 academies execute direct engagement activities. Key initiatives include the "alumniul.online" platform for mentoring and the "Heart UL" microdonation program, which supports students in financial distress. She also highlighted the Dr. Uroš Seljak Prize, an annual \$10,000 award funded by an alumnus, as a prime example of how successful graduates can directly incentivize excellence in student research.

Learn more

[University of Ljubljana Alumni](#)



[Aurore Spedicato \(Paris Sciences & Letters - PSL University\)](#) detailed the specific challenges of building a unified alumni identity for a collegiate university established in 2010.

Learn more

[PSL Alumni](#)



PSL must navigate the dual task of coordinating 170,000 alumni from its 13 constituent schools while simultaneously engaging the 1,300 alumni who graduated directly from PSL. She outlined a strategic roadmap for 2025–2026 that includes establishing a joint governance structure, launching a unified community platform, and introducing the PSL Award to build loyalty. Spedicato noted that the main operational obstacles remain database management and the recruitment of enough volunteers to manage the diverse interests of the collegiate network.

[Athina Frangou Selipa \(University of Cyprus - UCY\)](#)

shared a showcase of alumni relations and development focused on the vision of "Once a UCY student, always a part of UCY". The UCY model is built on four pillars:

engagement, empowerment, lifelong learning, and global reach. She highlighted the integration of fundraising into their alumni strategy, citing campaigns such as "Building the City of Knowledge" and "Research Saves Lives". To ensure the sustainability of these efforts, UCY uses specific KPIs to track event attendance and mentorship relationships, while also conducting regular digital and phone surveys to gather qualitative feedback from their community.

Following the institutional presentations, the session concluded with a dynamic discussion on the evolving role of the **"Alumni Officer" within the UNICA network**. Participants agreed that while advanced digital tools - ranging from dedicated CRM platforms to common social media like LinkedIn and WhatsApp - are essential for maintaining reach, they are most effective when they facilitate "digital to personal" transitions. The speakers emphasized that there is "no single recipe" for success; rather, institutions must listen to their members' specific professional needs and cater to their "emotional connection" to their alma mater. Ultimately, the session underscored that the most impactful alumni relations are those that prioritize lifelong mentorship and create tangible opportunities for former students to give back to the current generation.



[Learn more](#)

[UCY Alumni Community](#)

Change Management & Alumni Connections. Paradigm shift Training



Octavian Pantiş
Founder & Managing
Partner of Qualians

The session explored the mechanisms that help us initiate change and achieve a new level of results. Participants had the chance to reflect on their current approaches to **engage the alumni community** and find new ways and tools to design and enhance their alumni strategies.

This interactive session led by [Octavian Pantiş, Founder & Managing Partner of Qualians](#), focused on the psychological foundations of change and leadership and included not only concepts and tools, but many examples that people can relate to.

Pantiş argued that our perception of the world is filtered through our own "lenses," meaning we see reality not as it truly is, but as we are ourselves. He introduced a **behavioural model** suggesting that, while organizations often focus on changing results and behaviours, true transformation requires addressing the underlying beliefs and assumptions that drive them. By illustrating this through the "**Tom Sawyer paradigm**" - where changing a mindset makes a difficult task desirable, based on the scene in Mark Twain's novel where Tom convinces his friends to paint a fence for him - he emphasized that **shifting perspectives** is often more powerful than changing the environment itself.

To foster this growth mindset within university leadership and alumni relations, Pantiş provided practical strategies for staying open-minded, such as avoiding "killer phrases," tolerating "good mistakes," and actively seeking out "people from the future". This forward-looking perspective was complemented by remarks from Prof. Profiriu, who spoke on the **importance of building bridges with the younger generations**.

Prof. Profiriu noted that the future of Europe depends on the youth becoming more proactive and open-minded, urging institutions to facilitate a cultural and linguistic connection that honours shared heritage while embracing a more unified European identity.



About Qualians

Qualians supports organizations in building strong leadership pipelines that are capable of managing change, fostering a healthy and effective culture, and executing growth strategies.

Learn more

qualians.com

Conclusion and Outlook

The UNICA Alumni Relations Seminar concluded by reinforcing the idea that alumni are a strategic necessity rather than a ceremonial luxury for modern European universities. Throughout the sessions, the event underscored that building a successful alumni community requires a **shift from transactional interactions to a relational, long-term approach**. Key takeaways from the meeting included:

1

A Lifelong Partnership: Alumni should be viewed as "partners for life" and an institution's "best friends," carrying embedded institutional memory that can support reputation, research, and mission-driven initiatives.

2

Engagement from "Day One": Successful engagement does not begin at graduation; it must be nurtured from the first day a student enters the university to foster the emotional connection and loyalty necessary for future giving back.

3

Alignment with institutional strategy: Designing a strategy for Alumni Relations is not a parallel endeavour to institutional development, but rather an integral part of it. It should be closely aligned with the university's overall mission, values, and long-term priorities, ensuring that alumni engagement contributes meaningfully to areas such as education, research, internationalisation, and societal impact.

4

Diverse Models of Success: Whether through the decentralized faculty-led model of the University of Ljubljana, the global research-focused network of the MCAA, or the industry-aligned partnerships seen at ASE and PwC, there is "no single recipe" for success.

5

Bridging the Future: The closing remarks emphasized that the ultimate goal is to build bridges with the younger generation, encouraging them to be more proactive and "European" in their outlook to ensure the long-term sustainability of the academic community.

In summary, the seminar provided a foundation for UNICA member universities to move from strategic reflection to practical application, leveraging digital tools and personal interactions to transform their graduates into global advocates. As noted in the final takeaways, the event left participants with a sense of optimism regarding the power of the UNICA network to scale up these vital efforts.

Actionable ways forward

After the Seminar, one important question needs to be addressed: what can UNICA do for its members universities to support the development of their Alumni Relations strategies? Below are some suggested actionable ways forward for members' consideration:

- **Continue enabling member-led community of practice:** the biggest asset of UNICA is its network of diverse members. Hence, UNICA can keep supporting universities in this area by bringing professionals together to exchange good practices and tools. This would help translate the diversity of existing models into shared learning opportunities and practical inspiration;
- **Facilitate conversations with stakeholders and industry:** UNICA is well-placed to connect members universities with organisations and networks dedicated to Alumni Relations, in particular programme focus organisations, as well as representatives of the private sector and employers to foster partnerships that enhance alumni engagement while also ensuring that alumni strategies remain aligned with evolving labour market needs and societal challenges;
- **Leverage existing activities:** Alumni Relations can be integrated into ongoing UNICA meetings, working groups, and events, with members invited to bring alumni perspectives or speakers, embedding the topic across the network's core work;
- **Showcase members' success stories:** Members can make use of UNICA communications tools, such as the newsletter, to highlight case studies, giving these stories visibility at a network level;
- **Curate resources:** UNICA can collect, structure, and share existing materials, templates, and practices contributed by members.

BEYOND THE REPORT

This report is an outcome of the sessions of the UNICA Alumni Relations Seminar 2025.

Learn more about this initiative and other UNICA initiatives on Alumni Relations:

- [Event's official page](#)
- [UNICA Alumni Activities: Survey report on Alumni Services within member universities \(2022\)](#)
- [UNICA – SGroup Webinar: Global alumni relations and models of alumni services & engagement as a strategic task of HEIs \(2021\)](#)



52 UNIVERSITIES | 38 EUROPEAN CAPITALS

Founded in 1990, UNICA is an institutional network of universities from the capitals of Europe committed to acting as a catalyst in the advancement, integration and cooperation of its member universities throughout Europe. Its vision is to be a driving force in the development of the European Higher Education and Research areas, and to empower its member universities to unlock their full potential, putting knowledge, Research, and Innovation at the service of the needs of society and of the coming generations.

The cultural diversity and “living lab” aspects of Capital cities, the proximity to governing bodies, their technological, cultural and innovative capacity, and the opportunities they provide as powerful economic and commercial centers, create a special environment for UNICA Members. Building on the diverse profiles of its members, UNICA aims to widen and strengthen international collaborations, engage academic leadership, and facilitate networking among academic communities. Activities are prepared by relevant seven UNICA working groups in cooperation with the UNICA Steering Committee and the UNICA Secretariat in Brussels.

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