

Alumni's Perceptions about Commitment towards their University: Drivers and Consequences

ABSTRACT.

Purpose: This paper intends to capture alumni's assessments and perceptions about decisive dimensions of their commitment towards their alma mater. Their academic experience and current situation are highlighted. Moreover, their perception about the role of Higher Education Institution (HEI) in this commitment-relationship is likewise valuable to get their involvement.

Design: The study took place at a Portuguese university. Three focus groups, with 21 participants, were conducted to get consistent information permitting further developments. Data were analysed through NVivo software.

Findings: The study gives interesting insights revealing dimensions such as the relationships with teachers, extra-curricular activities and initiation as decisive in their academic experience (AE). Recommending and sharing their experience, underline evidence of what they are willing to give back. A strong sense of belonging defined alumni statements, as well as pride at being part of the university. But they all demand an effective ability of the university to communicate with them.

Value: Overall conclusions offer a clear scenario of alumni's commitment, giving HEI's management valuable clues to improvement, but its responsibility in this commitment-relationship was also stressed. Moreover, results also provide strong contributions to literature enabling other HEIs to replicate the study or simply use the results for their own development.

Keywords: Relationship marketing, University, alumni, commitment-relationship, perceptions, focus group

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Introduction

European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) face a context of increasing competition, financial difficulties and demographic changes, which require innovative responses to achieve competitiveness, and marketization has been definitively one of them.

Relationship marketing (RM) frames approaches to students as main stakeholders, in order to strengthen their loyalty. A loyal student will become loyal alumni in the future and the long term-relationships with alumni will provide significant benefits to HEIs (e.g. Alwi & Kitchen, 2014; Helgesen & Nettet, 2007; Hennig-Thurau, Langer and Hansen, 2001; Iskhakova, Hilbert and Hoffmann, 2016). To sustain such relationships both, alumni and HEI, must be strongly committed into it. The higher the commitment more the intention to remain in the relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). HEIs' administrators must clearly understand determinants and consequences of alumni's commitment.

This study's main goal is the collection of robust information about drivers and consequences of commitment in such a way that a theoretical framework can arise to guide future studies.

This research took place at a Portuguese University. A qualitative research is conducted through alumni focus group. Data analysis takes place through *NVivo* software.

The alumni-alma mater commitment-relationship represents a profitable field for research, and these results provide HEIs with data to take into account when making accurate decisions. This study will bring interesting contributions, and certainly new questions will arise to feed more investigation. Moreover, its replication may help other HEIs to get answers for their questions, especially on what concerns Portuguese HEIs

Literature Review

Students, as HEIs' main stakeholders, must be attracted and retained in a very competitive market (Kotler and Fox, 1994). The capability of retaining students can be defined as the securing of students' loyalty and the certainty of their satisfaction. The focus lies now on foster relationships (defensive marketing) instead of the acquisition (offensive marketing) (Helgesen, 2008). Institutions realize the importance of economic customer values that arise in this process (Grönroos, 1994). Value perception of customers, is a particularly important concept to drive marketing strategies in HE' market as it settles a strong competitive advantage. Committed students benefit HEIs as they can positively influence quality of teaching and research development and, later, they become committed alumni (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001).

Geyskens et al., (1996) describe commitment as a nuclear element for successful RM, and therefore the research targets are the factors that contribute to the maintenance, development and enhancement of commitment. These authors stress affective (emotional) and calculative (cognitive) commitment being both psychological states. Affective commitment is related to the appreciation of a relationship, whereas calculative commitment refers the perception of the inherent switching costs of leaving it.

When applied to HEIs, and concerning relationships with alumni, the concepts are quite similar. The nature of alumni commitment is rooted in a sense of belonging, shared values and identification with their alma mater; in other words, affective commitment. Furthermore, the alumni-alma mater relationship is also assessed in terms of switching costs and benefits, stressing the calculative dimension through different services they

expect from HEIs, in terms of career advice, consulting support and free library access, among many others.

To assure the effectiveness of initiatives, HEIs are challenged to know their alumni, namely, identifying the variables that most influence giving and clearly understanding who is willing to give back (Henning, 2012; Pedro *et al.*, 2018; Tom and Elmer, 1994).

A set of experiences during academic experience define feelings and consequent relationships towards their alma mater (Gaier, 2005; McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). Mentioned experiences are multi-dimensional, considering all the educational resources offered, such as the course itself, support services, campus facilities and campus life, among many others (Browne *et al.*, 1998; Elliot and Shin, 2002).

Alumni assess their AE, evaluating the resources at their disposal, the quality of service received and the establishment of interpersonal relationships. Outcomes of this assessment forge different dimensions like satisfaction, image, trust, values and quality (e.g. Newman and Petrosko, 2011; Brown and Mazzarol, 2008; McAlexander *et al.*, 2003; Voss and Voss, 1997).

Commitment is a determinant of the cooperative behaviour. In terms of the alumni-alma mater relationship, it encompasses different facets, such as: willingness to recommend; selection of the institution for further study; joining the alumni association; voluntary support; mentoring; keeping in touch; receiving the newsletter; and influencing through their professional and personal connections (e.g. Iskhakova *et al.*, 2016; Gallo, 2012; Alwi and Kitchen, 2014; Helgesen and Nettet, 2007; Weerts and Ronca, 2007). To assure the effectiveness of initiatives, HEIs are challenged to know their alumni, namely, identifying the variables that most influence giving and clearly understanding who is willing to give back (Henning, 2012; Pedro *et al.*, 2018; Tom and Elmer, 1994).

The present study is conducted bearing this in mind. Empirical research in southern European countries is important, as it will contribute to developments in alumni affairs and may capture different features. The following sections present the empirical developments of this study.

Methodology

Research context, strategy and instrument development

The research took place at the University of Algarve, a Portuguese HEI that began its activity in 1979 and encompasses both systems: polytechnic and university. Through to present day, it has had around 30,000 alumni. The alumni office began its activities in 2009. Some important initiatives have already been undertaken towards the alumni engagement, such as: a mentorship programme; alumni career award; alumni council; and alumni meetings. A qualitative study took place to collect the alumni point of view and to get a closer understanding of the sense of their actions related to commitment-relationship determinants and consequences. It was also aimed at catching their expectations about the university's role in this commitment-relationship. This is an intrinsic case study, as the researcher aims for a deeper comprehension of a particular case that possesses investigative interest (Stake, 1995).

Data were collected through focus group technique, which took place in December 2017 and January 2018 in the university facilities. A moderately structured interview guide was produced according to the literature. Four main themes were defined with the aim to capture participants' opinions about: *academic experience*; *commitment indicators*;

HEI's commitment and after graduation. Participants' responses were audio recorded and a verbatim transcription was done afterwards.

Sampling features

The sample comprised 21 individuals covering a time range from 1995 to 2012. A purposive sample was used to cover as much as possible of the different features of the undergraduates (e.g. graduation years; both systems university and polytechnic; alumni of night and normal schedules; representation of all formation areas; volunteers).

Regarding the participants in the focus groups, 12 were women, and their age ranged from 28 to 53 years old (mean=39, SD=7.4), and 13 usually participate in the alma mater activities. Of the participants, 10 were from the polytechnic, and 11 from the university system.

Data analysis

Data were treated through content analysis. Thematic analysis allowed a better understanding of the central meanings, including reading and rereading of the transcripts to the themes identified. Codification was conducted taking into consideration the four dimensions of the study, and categories and subcategories emerged (Guerra, 2006), regarding exclusiveness – each element belongs exclusively to a category, and exhaustiveness – language data represents all recording units without exception (Stemler, 2001). Results of this development are comprised in Table 1. Software NVivo Pro Version 11 was used to analyze data.

Results

The results underline a set of categories that we can easily identify in the literature, drawing out parallelisms with other studies, revealing an overview of some determinant themes that emerged in participants' statements. Table 1 shows these categories and subcategories, as well as some main references to the theoretical frame.

Table 1. Codification and categorization

Dimension	Category	Subcategory	References
Academic experience	Teachers	Quality Empathy Motivation	e.g. Elliott and Shin (2000); Helgesen & Nettet (2007); Schlesinger, et al. (2016); Elsharnouby (2015)
	Extracurricular activities	Life in campus Extra activities related to course program	e.g. Skari (2014); Newman & Petrosko (2011); Clotfelter (2001)
	Relationships	Teachers Fellow colleagues Nonacademic staff	e.g. Hartman & Schmidt (1995); McAlexander & Koenig (2001)
	Initiation		e.g. Martin et al. (2015); McAlexander & Koenig (2012)
	Facilities and environment		e.g. Helgesen & Nettet (2007); Elliott & Healy (2001); Elliott & Shin (2002)

Commitment indicators	To give back	e.g. Weerts & Ronca (2007); Weerts, Cabrera & Sanford (2010); Iskhakova et al. (2016)
	Recommendation	e.g. Bernal & Mille (2013); Pedro et al. (2018); Wilkins & Huisman (2014)
	To share experience	e.g. Iskhakova et al. (2016); McAlexander & Koenig (2001)
	Further Training	e.g. Helgesen & Nettet (2007); McAlexander & Koenig (2001); Schlesinger et al. (2016)
	Pride (Associated with the sense of belonging)	e.g. Hennig- Thurau et al. (2001); McAlexander & Koenig (2001); Nora & Cabrera (1993); Mael & Ashforth (1992)
Present situation	Constrains	e.g. Newman & Petrosko (2011); Belfield & Beney (2000)
HEI's commitment	Training development	e.g. Schlesinger et al. (2016)
	Solicitations	e.g. Skari (2014); Belfield & Beney (2000)
	Communication	Obligation to listen Bernal & Mille (2013)

Conclusions and implications

Main conclusions

Prior to any objective conclusion, it is important to mention the enthusiastic involvement of the focus group participants, simply because the call was about their alma mater. A significant amount of nostalgia was also common, and generally, positive feelings emerged along conversation.

Memories about their *academic experience* revealed that their interactions with teachers and the empathy and motivation towards students are strong reasons to keep in touch with some of the teachers. Extracurricular activities and inherent accomplishments were mentioned as important at that time, along with all the fun those moments provided, which ultimately contribute to fostering relationships that are strongly embedded in their memories. Initiation of freshman remains in their memories but does not gather consensus. Some remembered it as funny moments and a good aid for integration, while a few talked about it in a negative way. Places, facilities and environments came into the discussion as well, and also underlie positive references.

Concerning *after graduation*, constraints about lack of time and work demands appear to be the main reasons for limiting their participation, although they all stressed their will to collaborate and underlined the HEI's solicitations as crucial to leveraging their engagement.

Indeed, solicitations appear among drivers in *HEI's commitment*, revealing a challenging task that HEIs must include in their strategies. Moreover, structured and consistent communication with alumni seems to be a crucial starting point to achieve positive outcomes in this relationship. Maintaining training quality was also mentioned as a determinant on this commitment relationship. Alumni are aware that training quality has a key role in HEI's prestige, meaning potential personal and professional benefits for them, too. This may explain their concern about it and highlight their availability to help in this process.

Finally, concerning indicators of alumni commitment, a common sense of duty to give back what they received seems to mark their commitment. The concept *to come back* often appeared during the conversation associated with that duty, underlining a significant amount of nostalgia and denoting will to participate, collaborate and give support whenever it is needed. Regarding *giving back*, recommendation and the share of their experience stood out, and both encompass a deep sense of value that alumni can provide to their alma mater. The will to get further training emerged not only as a means for academic valorisation, but also as a way to be involved again and a reinforcement of their sense of belonging, as was very much pronounced through several references to pride. Indeed, this feeling arises as one attribute for alumni commitment, emphasizing a consistent starting point for a relationship, but giving the university strong reasons to conduct this process with caution. The next section presents some implications resulting from these findings.

Main implications

HEIs are given a set of challenges and opportunities for improvement through findings in this study, namely, the ones related to *academic experience* and *HEI's commitment*. The involvement of all direct intervenient of the educational process in these activities should be a concern when designing strategies. Follow some suggestions:

- ✓ *Empathy* and *motivation* in a relational marketing perspective demand coherent messages towards professors, enhancing the importance students give to those attributes, and shall emphasize the key role professors have in the educational process.
- ✓ Regarding *extracurricular activities*, university officials must implement practices to encourage enrolment in non-academic activities.
- ✓ The *relationships* students foster influence their future involvement with alma mater, therefore they must be cultivated (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). Every event, activities, communication campaigns must be prepared under this scope.
- ✓ Effective communication channels should be a priority, to give HEIs the necessary abilities to relate with their students/alumni, especially to treat their feedback in an efficient way.
- ✓ *Initiation activities* should be considered within integration strategies
- ✓ A permanent assessment of *training quality* must underline strategic planning.
- ✓ Every effort to enhance organizational culture shall raise *pride* and *sense of belonging*.

Limitations and suggestions for further studies

This study has some limitations, which pave the way for further studies, as follows:

- ✓ This work applies to only one institution. To assure generalization of findings, this study should be applied to other similar HEIs.
- ✓ This sample comprised a diversity of alumni features, which do not allow a comparison between different groups. A further study, selecting homogeneous groups, could provide interesting data leading to identification of clusters.

- ✓ The scope of the study comprised four dimensions, each of which allowed generic findings. Regarding the key role of each, conducting a study for every dimension is worthy.
- ✓ The study took place in a certain period of time, and thus it gives a static perception of reality. A longitudinal study over time could map alumni perceptions and behaviours, permitting researchers to observe how these topics evolve.
- ✓ Further quantitative studies would provide deeper insights through the examination of the relationships between and among variables, and generalize results from a bigger alumni sample.

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