

Alumni from the Polytechnic of Leiria: path & challenges

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Abstract

This article analyses the development of the *alumni* Network of the Polytechnic of Leiria (Portugal) a higher public education institution through seven years. We present the main objectives and activities that are performed to engage alumni and bring them back to the academic community.

The most popular ways of communication like Facebook, LinkedIn and personal contact are also presented in order to establish a closer relationship between current, former and future students.

Some of the challenges are pointed out since there is the awareness that there is still a long way to go, improving many of the practices with the alumni contribution.

Keywords: *Alumni*; engagement; relationship; network

Background and Objectives

The Polytechnic of Leiria is a higher public education institution constituted in 1980 located in the coast center region of Portugal. It englobes 5 schools (3 in Leiria, 1 in Caldas da Rainha and 1 in Peniche), 4 libraries, organic research units, research units, several Services, advanced development and studies, distance learning unit and transfer and knowledge valorization center. The *Alumni* Network Office is placed in the headquarters

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of this educational institution in the city of Leiria. At the moment the Polytechnic of Leiria has 12.700 students, 900 teachers and 450 technical staff.

Alumni comes from the word *alumnus*, noun in Latin that means “pupil”. In practical *alumni* means “former students”. Through the almost 40 years of existence, several generations of students have attended the Polytechnic of Leiria and have led the name of the institution to all the world. Both internationally and nationally, there is a growing awareness of the importance of *alumni* networks for the development of Higher Education Institutions. Because of that we are aware of the unique and invaluable value of the former students (national, international and exchange students), for the evaluation of the institution success.

The *Alumni* Network of the Polytechnic of Leiria was formally constituted in February 2012 with the aim of recovering *alumni* relations, facilitating interactions, promoting the sharing of experiences and reinforcing the institution recognition/image, empowering the long life learning. It has some particular features due to the fact that the institution has 5 different schools in several areas, located in 3 different cities which is a daily challenge to engage former students for common activities when they belong to different realities and generations.

Our *Alumni* Network has some specified objectives. In this scope the Polytechnic’s training offer is spread and former students have the opportunity of lifelong learning. This lifelong learning is basically the learning and training during adult life and it will prepare people to the global competition capable of improving individual abilities (Adam, 2017);

The *Alumni* Network encourages the interaction between *alumni* and employers, providing contacts, synergies and partnerships, business opportunities and promoting joint initiatives. It also promotes activities that improve the relationship between current students and *alumni* through mentoring, coaching, open classes, sports and cultural initiatives, internships, scholarships, among others.

This service facilitates the *alumni* access to all the Polytechnic's initiatives according to special conditions. It also develops social responsibility actions in the community of current and former students and cooperates with the Polytechnic of Leiria to strengthen its mission and objectives towards the society, preserving the prestige of the institution.

Process

Alumni ways of communication

This Network uses a communication based on, mainly, digital platforms like websites⁴, Facebook⁵, e-mail, LinkedIn⁶, and also through the telephone and person contact. Currently we count with 4.200 registered *alumni*, 28.840 followers in LinkedIn and 6.785 followers in the Facebook page.

To make the *Alumni Network's* mission and objectives known within the academic community and to inform *alumni* in general, several advertising billboards, roll-ups, testimony, newsletters and information published in social media, are daily made.

To the implementation and spread of the initiatives of the *Alumni Network* it has been fundamental the support of some services of the Polytechnic of Leiria like the Image and Communication Office, the Distance Learning Unit and the Media Resources Center from the School of Education and Social Sciences. Also, since the beginning until now we could count on the collaboration of internships from the courses of "Human Resources and Organizational Communication" and "Communication and Media".

Since our main means of communication are social networks it is important to explain how the information is selected. For instance, in Facebook there is a focus on what everything is related to *alumni* like news, job offerings, learning and training offerings and events of interest. The written testimonies and the sharing of good practices are very

⁴ <http://redealumni.ipleiria.pt/>

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/redealumniPL/>

⁶ <https://pt.linkedin.com/school/politecnicodeleiria/>

attractive for all the academic community. This highlights the *alumni* entrepreneurs, prizes obtained and suggestions presented.

The Facebook page also cares about the sharing of other Polytechnic's Facebook pages, in order to promote as much information as possible about the institution that may interest *alumni*. In addition, sometimes former students also request collaboration to promote their own business, companies, works and projects. Recently pastimes were launched in order to promote *alumni* initiatives to make the page more interactive.

In an early stage, the Facebook page has revealed to be fundamental to the developing of the *Alumni* Network, since it included the registration link, thus allowing, the registration of hundreds of *alumni*. In consequence a database was created with relevant information about the former students.

Besides the Facebook page, the *Alumni* Network is also presented in the LinkedIn page of the Polytechnic of Leiria. Here agreements, testimonies and *alumni* initiatives or prizes obtained are published to a larger community.

The *Alumni* Network has a special area in the institution website where all the information can be observed and consulted like the agreements that offer special discounts in several areas like healthcare, sports, food, accommodation, vehicles, beauty, culture and leisure, teaching and clothing, among others.

During the 4 initial years newsletters to all of the registered *alumni* were made, published on Facebook and sent, through e-mail to all the community. In these newsletters initiatives and relevant information from the Polytechnic of Leiria and *alumni* were shared (For instance, testimonies and special conditions). However, according to the statistics they were not read by the majority of the *alumni* and thus not viable.

Activities

To involve the academic community of the Polytechnic of Leiria, several meetings with the schools deans were established through the year in order to organize the participation, representation and spread of our *Alumni* Network in the different events.

Since the beginning, the *Alumni* Network has been participating in events, like opportunities for employability, conferences and open classes, among other. These participations allow the interaction with *alumni*, motivating them to register in *Alumni* Network and the collection of testimonies.

In these testimonies the former students share their route through the Polytechnic of Leiria and professional path afterwards. This testimony collection, in flyers or videos, is also a great moment in this network since all the community can observe the experiences before and after the attended program.

They report to the memories as students and to the importance of the training received, presenting suggestions for the network life, being possible to rebuild the “before and after” of the former students. Then, the testimonies are shared in all the internal social networks. These testimonies collection allow to understand in which countries *alumni* are living and working.

Alumni feel very motivated and happy when the Polytechnic community knows what they are doing, enabling all to be proud. This action is also a way of giving the institution some prestige and recognition due to the success of its former students (Vieira, 2018). In addition, the *alumni* feel that they have not been forgotten.

All thousand registers are celebrated and some symbolic merchandising are offered to the winner. An anniversary card is also sent daily on the date of their birthday. This way, *alumni* can feel they are still part of this “Family” and current and future students also feel inspired. This feeling makes a positive image of the institution much easier to share because *alumni* don’t feel obligated to do that, so the marketing “mouth-to-mouth” is more genuine (Vieira,2018). *Alumni* from these initiatives are also promoters of

employment and willing to recruit students from the same institution. The ambassadors living in the country or even abroad are well engaged to help other students. These ambassadors, besides helping students who are going to the countries where ambassadors are, can also “recruit” new students to their old institution who are looking for a foreign experience (Vieira, 2018).

Despite that, this network develops activities that the former students appreciate, such as walks gatherings, *alumni* days, invitation to be a speaker in conferences and seminars. In this consequence, the walk gatherings are made to promote reencounters among colleagues, friends, employees and teachers, to remind good old moments and to share experiences in an informal and relaxed environment. In *alumni* days we invite former students to talk to current students about labor market, to share their professional experiences and to give relevant tips for their career start.

The *Alumni* Network organized the first national meeting of *alumni* in Portugal and participated in several ICAREAlumni International Conferences.

Registration and Passport

To have access of all of what have been explained, former students have to be registered in *Alumni* Network which is an online questionnaire, through which it will be possible to consult the information about each one of former student. The next step is to give *alumni* a passport. This *Alumni* Passport is the official document to offer them some special conditions like access to the canteens/bars, libraries, participation with special discount in events, conferences, courses and special discounts previewed in the agreements with the Polytechnic of Leiria.

Outcomes and Impacts

From the beginning of 2012, the *Alumni* Network of the Polytechnic of Leiria's has been growing notoriously, since more and more *alumni* show interest in participating in it. They show that they are available for any proposal initiative, bringing new ideas, suggestions and experiences for a greater improvement. In the end of 2018 there were 4002 registered *alumni*, 175 agreements, 515 testimonies, 41 *alumni* prizes published, 123 *alumni* initiatives and 95 *alumni* living in foreign countries. Just only 5 months after we already verify that *Alumni* Network has grown having now 4200 registered *alumni*, 28.840 followers in LinkedIn and 6.785 followers in the Facebook page.

Even with a growing articulation between the *Alumni* Network of Polytechnic of Leiria and all of its schools and services, urges an awareness effort from the academic community for the importance of *Alumni* Network in the Polytechnic of Leiria. It is also necessary to stimulate this network with synergies in order to optimize special condition for *alumni* planned on the *alumni* passport, for example.

Conclusion

Despite the *Alumni* Network good development that is a long way waiting ahead, regarding the bigger involvement needed from all the internal academic community, if the Network wants to reach volunteering and fundraise, another dimension of *alumni* relations and proceed the alumni potential.

Besides that, it is necessary to create a human resources structure to be able to operate attentively in the activities planned for the future, since much of the work already done was developed by trainees (current students) and not permanent collaborators.

Therefore, the service will continue in order to make the network grow in all ways, always looking for the slogan: “Não desligue! Mantenha-se em Rede!” – “Don’t hang Up! Stay with us!”

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