

How to turn POTential Alumni into Alumni with POTential – a collaborative approach at the University of Pécs Medical School

*Klára Somodi, MA¹, Alan Abada, MD², Ibitamuno Caleb, MD³, Tolulope Oladele⁴,
Zsófia Duga, PhD⁵*

1 University of Pécs Medical School, Alumni Office, klara.somodi@aok.pte.hu

2 University of Pécs Medical School, Department of Anaesthesiology and Intensive Therapy

3 University of Pécs Medical School, Medical Skills Education and Innovation Centre

4 University of Pécs Medical School

5 University of Pécs Medical School, Marketing and Communications Department

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present the collaborative approach the Alumni Team of the University of Pécs Medical School (UPMS) initiated, piloted, and carried out in two consecutive semesters. This approach, the Junior Alumni Program (JAP), aims to equip students with the soft skills and career guidance needed to excel during their educational journey and beyond. The program offers workshops and resources which were intentionally designed to complement the traditional curriculum. By harnessing the experience and expertise of successful alumni, students gain exclusive access to knowledge and opportunities through the extensive POTE (POTE is the Hungarian abbreviation of the Medical University of Pécs) network. As a bonus, 'regular' Alumni involvement is growing exponentially through Junior Alumni events. The Alumni Team is dedicated to turn POTential Alumni into Alumni with POTential.

Keywords: alumni, international alumni, junior alumni, alma mater

Background

1. University of Pécs

The history of higher education in Pécs dates back to 1367, when Louis the Great initiated the establishment of a university in the episcopal city of Pécs. As a result of an integration process of several stages, the University of Pécs was founded, which has become one of the most famous, prestigious institutions having a leading role in regional education. In the year 2000, the colleges and universities in Pécs underwent a merger. Thus, at present, it has ten faculties which cover the full spectrum of high-quality higher education.

2. International medical education

After many turbulent years of history, Hungarian medical education started in 1923. The University of Pécs Medical School has a 100-year history of Hungarian, 38 years of English (launched in 1984) and 18 of German (2004) medical education. International dental education started in 2005 and 2006 (first in English, then in German), Pharmacy and Biotechnology in 2009 and 2010 (both in English). PhD studies in English have been offered since 1993.

3. Alumni Relations, Alumni engagement

Alumni relations on faculty level have not been treated as an individual entity/office until recently. Alumni engagement started in the 1980s with the introduction of the annual University Medical Days (10-15-20+ class reunions, awarding of honorary degrees) for Hungarian graduates. Due to the merger in the year 2000, in the framework of higher education integration, central and faculty level functions and registration run in parallel, causing many duplications.

With the wind of internalisation, international alumni hit the spotlight on a national level within the framework of the TÁMOP tenders (2009, 2011, 2014) bringing along several new services (new website, online platform, alumni meetings, newsletter) and international reunions (photo exhibition, sightseeing tours, wine tasting, galas, special yearbooks, scientific afternoon). However, by 2020 we reached the point where Hungarian and international alumni could no longer be treated separately, largely due to internationalisation and all kinds of staff and student mobility.

4. Alumni Office, Alumni Team

At the threshold of the pandemic in 2020, the faculty leadership decided on the establishment of an independent Alumni Office. Home-based work life gave the Alumni team enough time to brainstorm and launch the Junior Alumni Program as in-person instruction resumed.

The office now operates with one full-time employee, three senior advisors, two of whom are graduate doctors and PhD students themselves and one final-year medical student. There is also a local base of volunteer international graduates and 5-6th year students working alongside the Alumni Office to enhance the student experience and connect the student body with our incredible alumni.

Objectives of the Junior Alumni Program

Alumni, our graduate doctors, dentists, pharmacists, and biotechnologists are inherently part of the Medical School's intellectual and social capital. They play an important role in the three core purposes of the faculty: they are partners in education, research, and social commitment.

The foundations for such lifelong connection between the graduates and the educational institution are laid during the student years. The Alumni Office aims to facilitate the reconnection with the Alma Mater and fellow alumni, promote networking, and build a global social-professional alumni network. The investment in these prospective connections begins with the Junior Alumni Program.

Regarding alumni relations, we believe in the strength of personal connections. We believe that addressing and engaging Alumni begins with the recruitment of prospective candidates. Both domestic and international students need to be engaged while they are studying here, as it is extremely difficult to address them after they leave Pécs and/or the country. Furthermore, forging relationships with existing students and future graduates is key to demonstrating the attainability of success to ambitious prospective students. The Junior Alumni Program also brings visibility to the accomplishments of POTE graduates within the local and international community.

The Junior Alumni Program aims to equip students with the soft skills and career guidance needed to excel during their educational journey and beyond. The program offers workshops and resources which were intentionally designed to complement the traditional curriculum. By harnessing the experience and expertise of successful alumni, students gain exclusive access to knowledge and opportunities through the extensive POTE network.

The idea is to keep the whole JA program as much volunteer based as possible. The reason is not primarily financially driven, but rather to emphasize the power of Alumni and show what networking means, while remaining 100% authentic in the eyes of POTential Alumni. To preserve our authenticity, we ensured that every topic addressed during the workshops was presented by an alumna or alumnus. With this, we provided a natural environment for interaction and networking between the aspiring alumni (JAP attendees) and the already established alumni.

The word Alumni carries a value, gives a sense of professionalism. Therefore, we organise the JAP to mirror a typical medical student's career path. Hence, we dedicate about 20% to fun and about 80% to self-development-oriented activities. All activities are strictly professional; thus, JAP does not interfere with mentoring programmes. We identified the milestones at freshman, pre-clinical, clinical, and rotational stages and matched each milestone with possible workshop ideas. To simplify activities, a line was drawn between a tuning phase (1st and 2nd years) and a core (3rd to 6th years) to serve the widest possible audience.

Following the medical student career path approach, each workshop was closed with a written quiz to assess the knowledge provided. The JAP is an extracurricular activity in which co-curricular credits (non-ECTS) are awarded. A certificate of participation is given after each

event. After two completed workshops and an Alumni Café, a certificate of merit is issued that entitles students extra points when applying in-house to Erasmus, Undergraduate Research or PhD studies.

In the workshop quizzes, besides multiple-choice questions, we had one open question each time, regarding the usefulness of the given workshop and ideas for further topics. The open questions provided invaluable feedback in both regards and justified our initial hypothesis – that there is a need to bridge the gap between Medical School reality and curriculum.

Pilot program

1. The workshops

During the first active semester of the Junior Alumni Program, students were able to participate in workshops and cafés. A variety of workshops were offered to students at the basic, pre-clinical and clinical stages of their medical journey. These workshops focused on introducing students to the co-curricular societies, providing guidance on pursuing scientific research, and advice on navigating the educational and professional demands of the rotational year, which offer opportunities for professional and character development.

1.1.WS#1 Pre-preparation for TDK and Introduction to societies at UPMS

It is our belief that potential Alumni should be engaged from the onset of their medical studies, therefore, the Alumni Team was present on the Orientation days with an Alumni stand. Our first workshop targeted the first- and second-year students. Our aim was to introduce, prepare, or rather “pre-prepare” them for extracurricular activities such as undergraduate research (TDK), Emergency and Surgical Societies, and the Circle of Demonstrators. We also made them aware of the various scholarship opportunities existing at our university.

The workshop was mutually advantageous for students, lecturers, and supervisors, saving them time and energy on informing students and receiving ready applications instead. The workshop involved three alumni and four final year students as presenters. We recorded over 30 participants.

1.2. WS#2 Presentation techniques and ppt making, Introduction to block practices

This workshop was aimed at upper year students but was open to all years as well. It mainly focused on what it takes to present a research project, how to keep an audience engaged during scientific presentations, what belongs in the slides of a thesis defence, tips, and protocols.

The promotion of recently introduced block practices was rather timely, only 8% of participants knew about the opportunity of taking a 2-week practice at any clinical department during the instruction period with certified absences. Involvement count was three alumni and two student presenters, and over 35 participants.

1.3. WS#3 How to prepare for the rotational year?

This workshop targeted the upper year medical students to assist in planning out their final year practices in and outside of Hungary. It was moderated in a panel format involving three alumni and three final year students in the middle of their rotations. Immediate questions were accepted, and the session was followed by a Q&A. Over 40 participants were present.

This event highlighted the first limitation of the JA program, namely that it solely focused on medical students, excluding dental, pharmacy and biotechnology students.

1.4. WS#4 How to prepare a scientific paper & a thesis, Introduction to scientific databases

The most popular workshop of the Junior Alumni events so far, with over 100 participants, clearly indicating that this kind of guidance is underrepresented in the curriculum. Due to the high interest, we gained the most valuable feedback from this workshop, clearly mapping out the demand for next semester's topics.

2. The Motivational Café

One of the most popular events was the Alumni Motivational Café, where students were inspired by the distinct journeys of three keynote speakers. Students were taken on a journey of exploration, as the speakers described their paths from graduation to ultimately finding their calling in the different areas of medicine.

When we decided on selecting our first speakers, we intended to have a Hungarian, an English and a German Program graduate, and cover several other aspects, like male/female, dentist/physician, clinician/researcher/lecturer, with international and domestic experience to serve the widest possible range of audience.

Each speaker had 20 minutes to talk about their lives after POTE, how they decided on their field of specialization or research, and how they managed to exploit the knowledge acquired at POTE in their everyday life. Speaking points also included ground-breaking moments in their medical journey and how it changed the course of their career, the most inspiring cases of their medical career, and life lessons learnt during medical school that influenced their post-POTE life. After the speeches, we facilitated a Q&A section in a form of informal conversation.

The first Alumni Motivational Café timed right before the exam period was a huge success. It was not only highly informative but also deep and personal. Indeed, the participants described the experience as profound and inspiring. Networking began with the Q&A and allowed members of the JAP to form meaningful connections with past graduates, along with a real cup of coffee and some catering.

3. The Professional Café – Behind the lens of an employer: CVs, Interviews, and applications

Whether the challenge is searching for a summer practice, applying for rotations, or beginning a professional career, a good CV is essential. One might know every drug and its pharmacodynamics, but so do all the other applicants. What sets ones' CV apart? What makes an application stand out? What makes someone the best candidate for the job? We invited three alumni, who are leading experts in the healthcare field to prepare our candidates for the competitive job market.

Following the incredible keynote speeches from the perspective of a Pharmaceutical Recruiter, a Medical Departmental Head and a Dental Clinic Director, our students had the opportunity to discuss what exactly employers are looking for, how to package their skills, refine their CVs, and blow the interviewer away.

After the event, networking was facilitated once again.

4. The Career Inn

Learning from the Rotational year workshop, an opportunity presented itself to serve the interests of our graduating dental class. One of our first English Dentistry Program graduates inquired about the opportunity to meet the graduating class with the aim of recruiting three future dentists from Pécs to the UK. The round table discussion covered all aspects of licensing, administration, visa issues, differences between the NHS and private sectors, professional development opportunities.

After the event, networking continued in a restaurant in the city centre, as the name of the event suggest, which provided a great opportunity to reunite with fellow Pécs alumni as well.

Outcomes and Impacts

1. Limitations of the pilot program

We focused too much on medical students' career path when setting up the milestones to reach the widest audience possible. Feedback clearly shows that pharmacists, biotechnologists, and dentists need special tailoring. From the beginning of the second semester, we started adapting to special needs but keeping to the initial plans and layout of the program as much as possible.

The JAP has received criticism for addressing Hungarian, German and English program students exclusively in English. After the pilot year we need to assess real needs and find the necessary resources to expand if the demand is real.

2. Collaborations resulting from the JA program

The JAP has been gaining recognition. This is evidenced by collaboration proposals from other reputable university societies such as the Undergraduate Research Society and the Surgical Society.

2.1. Undergraduate Research Society

After the first two workshops we were approached by the Undergraduate Research Society (Hungarian abbreviation: TDK) seeking collaboration in organizing their 1st TDK Saloon in English. Besides organizational (mainly promotional) tasks, one of the senior members of the Alumni team was invited to moderate the event, and another colleague was member of the jury. Having put together a Junior Alumni database also helped to advertise and recruit student presenters for both the TDK Saloon and later to the TDK conference.

2.2. Pécs Surgical Society

In the second semester, the Alumni Team provided the same organizational support in the 1st Surgical Society Conference. Next year we plan to invite international alumni to be members of the jury.

3. What else is POTential?

Besides the already existing Junior Alumni events, we wish to expand the portfolio with “Speciality Cafés” and “Destination Cafés”; the former introducing medical, dental, pharmaceutical, and biotechnological specialities thorough personal Alumni experience, and the latter focusing on favoured countries and destinations after graduation.

We wish to rethink and renew the alumni website, as well as putting together a resource library for graduating students. Our first alumni podcast dedicated to the Junior Alumni program will come out before graduation.

Conclusions

Through the Junior Alumni Program, students, university leadership and the participating alumni have come to recognize the value of building mutually beneficial relationships with the next generation of scientists, clinicians, and healthcare professionals.

In just two semesters the JAP reached out to over 350 students and engaged 18 alumni directly, and several local alumni indirectly, as the events facilitated reunions with the revisiting presenters. Thus, we can say that as an extra benefit, our ‘regular’ Alumni involvement is growing exponentially through Junior Alumni events.

We strongly believe that the early involvement of undergraduate students in alumni matters will strengthen bonds and result in stronger connection with the Alma Mater after graduation. The final year students, who participated in workshops as panellists or presenters, already indicated that they would be happy to return to Pécs in a year and share their experience about their first year after Medical School.

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