

Engaging Pre-Alumni and Alumni Through Activities and Traditions: A Case Study of Kaunas University of Technology

Vida Drasutė

Head of Alumni Centre, Kaunas University of Technology, Lithuania

vida.drasute@ktu.lt

Abstract

Universities increasingly understand alumni relations as a strategic function that strengthens reputation, employability, knowledge exchange, and community identity. This paper develops an applied case study based on the Kaunas University of Technology (KTU) approach to alumni support and engagement, with particular emphasis on the transition from student (pre-alumni) status to lifelong alumni belonging. Drawing on the presentation “Engaging Pre-Alumni and Alumni Through Alumni Activities and Traditions. KTU Real Case,” presented during the 11th ICAREAlumni conference, the paper argues that effective alumni engagement begins before graduation, is sustained through coordinated institutional structures, and becomes most powerful when it is embedded as a culture rather than delegated only to a single administrative unit. The KTU case highlights five mutually reinforcing elements: an inclusive definition of alumni, a coordination model linking the Alumni Association and Alumni Center, an early engagement pathway for students, a diversified portfolio of alumni-student activities, and enduring traditions such as reunions, mentorship, networking events, alumni stories, and symbolic transition moments. The paper contributes a practice-oriented framework for higher education institutions seeking to convert episodic alumni events into systematic relationship management. It concludes that alumni engagement is not only a matter of fundraising or communication, but a form of identity-building through which students can recognize their future selves in alumni and alumni can continue to see themselves as part of the university’s living community.

Keywords: alumni engagement; pre-alumni; higher education; alumni traditions; relationship management; Kaunas University of Technology.

Introduction

Alumni relations have moved beyond the traditional logic of maintaining address lists, inviting graduates to reunions, and seeking occasional philanthropic support. In contemporary higher education, alumni are increasingly viewed as partners in institutional development, student employability, reputation building, curriculum relevance, and the long-term public value of the university. This change is especially visible in universities that operate in competitive, international, and innovation-driven environments, where reputation is formed not only by research outputs or rankings but also by the lives, careers, and civic contributions of graduates.

The case of Kaunas University of Technology (KTU) illustrates how alumni engagement can be constructed as a continuous pathway from student identity to lifelong community membership. The presentation that forms the basis of this paper defines alumni

broadly as graduates of first, second, and third-cycle studies, professional studies, microcredential courses, and Erasmus+ exchange programmes (Drășuț, 2026). It also distinguishes several alumni groups, including recent graduates, established alumni, senior leaders, and global alumni. This broad framing prevents alumni relations from being limited to degree-holding donors or ceremonial guests. Instead, alumni become the university's living brand: a community that carries the institution's name across time, sectors, and countries.

The purpose of this paper is to transform the KTU practice case into an academic-style discussion of alumni support and engagement. The analysis is guided by three questions. First, why does alumni engagement matter for the university? Second, how can a university build an early engagement pathway before graduation? Third, what role do traditions and coordinated structures play in sustaining alumni commitment over time?

The paper argues that the strongest alumni programmes are those in which students encounter alumni early, alumni encounter meaningful opportunities to contribute, and the university provides coordination that turns individual goodwill into a stable culture of belonging.

Conceptual Background: Alumni as a Strategic Relationship Community

The literature on alumni engagement often connects alumni relations with advancement, institutional reputation, philanthropic behaviour, volunteerism, and brand community. Weerts and Ronca (2007) emphasised that supportive alumni differ in how they contribute: some donate, some volunteer, and some combine multiple forms of support. This distinction is useful because it broadens the measure of engagement beyond financial giving alone. In many European higher education contexts, including Lithuania, philanthropy develops alongside other forms of cooperation; therefore, alumni impact is often seen through mentoring, employability support, guest lectures, advocacy, networking, and knowledge transfer.

Brand community theory provides a second relevant lens. McAlexander et al. (2006) argued that higher education institutions can cultivate relationship networks among students, alumni, faculty, and the institution itself. In this perspective, alumni engagement is not a one-directional message sent by the university to graduates. It is a network of reciprocal relationships in which institutional identity is produced and reproduced through shared experiences, symbols, rituals, and stories. Traditions such as annual awards, reunions, mentoring rituals, or faculty-specific meetings are not decorative additions; they function as social mechanisms through which belonging is repeatedly enacted.

A further conceptual point concerns the timing of alumni engagement. If students meet alumni only at graduation or after graduation, the relationship begins too late. The KTU case explicitly states that the best time to build alumni loyalty is before graduation, even from the first day when the students enter the university (Drășuț, 2026). This statement aligns with the idea of pre-alumni engagement: students should experience the alumni network as part of their studies, not as an external structure they may discover later. Early exposure allows students to see alumni as career role models, industry translators, mentors, and evidence of the university's long-term value. It also allows alumni to remain connected to the everyday life of the institution rather than appearing only during formal ceremonies.

The KTU Alumni Relations Model

KTU's alumni relations model is built on two complementary structures: the Kaunas University of Technology Alumni Association and the Kaunas University of Technology Alumni Center. The Alumni Association is presented as a voluntary, non-profit organisation that unites generations of KTU alumni and strengthens traditions of communication and cooperation between alumni and the university. The Alumni Center is described as a structural unit responsible for developing alumni relations with the university and the association, strengthening the role of alumni, and initiating, creating, and supporting activities (Drąsutė, 2026). This dual structure is significant because it combines community ownership with institutional coordination. More information about activities developed by both structures could be found at alumni.ktu.edu.

KTU has more than 170,000 alumni across programmes, while the Alumni Association currently unites approximately 2,200 active alumni who voluntarily joined the network since 11 November, 2011, when the association was established by alumni themselves (Drąsutė, 2026). These figures show both scale and development potential. A large alumni population represents a considerable social and professional network, but the existence of such a network does not automatically produce engagement. Without coordination, alumni engagement tends to remain fragmented, dependent on personal contacts, isolated initiatives, or sporadic faculty-level activities. KTU's model recognises that alumni relations require systematic outreach, institutional memory, and a student-alumni bridge.

Systematic outreach means that alumni are contacted through regular, planned communication across different stages of their journey. Institutional memory means that traditions, relationships, stories, and previous forms of cooperation are preserved rather than lost when staff, students, or alumni leaders change. The student-alumni bridge means that current students are not passive observers of alumni success but active participants in alumni-led and alumni-supported activities. Together, these functions convert alumni engagement from a set of events into a relationship-management system.

Early Engagement Pathway: From Student to Alumni

The early engagement pathway is one of the strongest practical contributions of the KTU case. It begins before or at the beginning of studies and continues through graduation into the first post-graduation year. During the first year, alumni experience and knowledge can be shown through guest lectures, success stories, social media visibility, networking events, and reunions organized in the faculties. In 2022 KTU Alumni centre launched the programme 9 faculties – 9 months, where each faculty organize reunion where students, academic community, administration and of course alumni are invited. Reunions are also organized of separate groups of alumni of particular study programme or jubilee alumni groups (when the studies are finished 5, 10, ... 50 years ago). Alumni come back to university also to share their success stories with the 1st year students or to present their knowledge and experience for senior students. The purpose is to make alumni presence visible within the student experience. A first-year student who hears a relevant alumni story can more easily understand the connection between study choices and possible career trajectories.

During years two and three, the pathway becomes more interactive. Mentorship programmes, career talks, alumni shadowing, conferences, networking events, and internships allow students to move from passive inspiration to active contact. At this stage, alumni can support decision-making about specialization, career direction, workplace culture, and professional identity. Such activities are particularly valuable because students often need contextual knowledge that is not fully available in formal curricula. Alumni can translate academic knowledge into professional practice and provide realistic, field-specific perspectives.

In the final year, students are encouraged to participate actively in alumni-led events and initiatives, including major traditions such as gala dinners or community activities. Graduation then becomes a transition ceremony in which students do not simply leave the university; they formally enter the alumni network. The first year after graduation is the beginning of continued engagement, when recent graduates can be welcomed into the network and encouraged to remain connected while their student experience is still recent. This staged approach supports identity continuity: the student becomes an alumnus or alumna without losing the sense of belonging to the university community.

Activity Portfolio: Connecting Alumni and Students

KTU's alumni-student activity portfolio is diverse, which is essential for inclusive engagement. Not every alumnus or student will be motivated by the same format. Some prefer structured mentoring, others informal networking, public storytelling, volunteering, recruitment, case competitions, or symbolic traditions. The presentation identifies several main activity types: guest lectures, mentorship, career fairs, case competitions, coffee chats, and joint volunteering (Drășuț, 2026). Each format contributes a different type of value.

Guest lectures bring real-world experience into classrooms and demonstrate how disciplinary knowledge is applied in professional settings. Mentorship offers one-on-one guidance for career and personal growth, creating deeper relational capital than one-time events. Career fairs connect alumni-led or alumni-associated companies with students and support employability. Case competitions allow alumni to act as judges, brief owners, and industry partners, while students engage with real problems and practical standards. Coffee chats create low-pressure spaces where meaningful relationships may begin. Joint volunteering positions alumni and students as co-contributors to a shared purpose, which can strengthen horizontal community ties.

The case also includes activities that begin before the formal student journey. For example, KTU presents itself to teenagers through a summer campus titled "The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe on Uninhabited Island" (Drășuț, 2026). This indicates that alumni relations can intersect with outreach, recruitment, and early institutional identity formation. When young people meet alumni or encounter alumni-supported activities before entering university, they begin to associate the institution with a wider community rather than only a study programme.

Traditions as Relationship Infrastructure

A distinctive feature of the KTU case is the emphasis on traditions. Traditions create rhythm, expectation, and memory. They help alumni know when and how they can return,

and they help students understand that the university has a life beyond lectures, examinations, and formal administration. The presentation identifies several traditional events, including “Alumni invite Alumni and their friends,” KTU Motoride, the Association’s birthday-awards night, “Try on the alumni chair,” the “9 Faculties - 9 Months” programme, and a speed networking event focused on the habit “Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood” (Drăsutê, 2026).

The monthly format “Alumni invite Alumni and their friends” is particularly important because regularity reduces the barriers to participation. If alumni know that meetings take place on the last Wednesday of each month, the tradition becomes part of the community calendar. Topics such as travel, leadership, personal worlds, and achievements allow alumni to appear not only as professionals but as whole persons with stories, passions, and identities. Such storytelling supports emotional connection, which is a prerequisite for sustained engagement.

KTU Motoride shows that alumni engagement can be built through shared interests that are not narrowly academic. A motorcycle event accompanied by a lecture can attract alumni who may not attend conventional institutional meetings. Similarly, the birthday-awards night combines celebration, recognition, fundraising potential, and institutional storytelling. Recognition events can strengthen social norms of contribution by showing that alumni support is visible, valued, and meaningful. The “9 Faculties - 9 Months” programme further decentralises engagement by bringing alumni back to their faculties, where memories and professional identities are often strongest.

The “Try on the alumni chair” initiative is a notable example of experiential engagement. Alumni are invited to give up their chair for a day or part of a day to a younger colleague, allowing that person to experience what a working day looks like, what competencies are needed, and what challenges and joys the role includes (Drăsutê, 2026). This initiative converts abstract career guidance into embodied learning. It also communicates trust: alumni are not only telling students about professional life but opening their professional environment to them.

Mentorship, Success Stories, and Real Impact

Mentorship is presented in the KTU case as a transformative experience based on professional relationships, experience, opening doors, and shaping the next generation. This framing is important because it positions mentoring as reciprocal rather than hierarchical. Students receive guidance, but alumni also gain meaning by contributing to someone else’s development. In this sense, mentoring is a form of generativity: alumni can translate accumulated experience into support for future graduates.

Success stories serve a complementary function. The presentation includes a dedicated alumni success stories platform and examples of interviews with alumni of faculties. These interviews invite alumni to explain why they chose a particular study path, what their favourite module was, what opportunities KTU offered, and what advice they would give to incoming first-year students. Such stories are effective because they connect institutional claims with personal testimony. A programme description may tell students what is possible; an alumni story shows how possibility becomes a real biography.

The presentation’s student quotation, “Connecting with a KTU alumni opened doors I didn’t even know existed - from insights to opportunities abroad,” captures the practical and

symbolic value of alumni engagement (Drășuț, 2026). One connection may provide information, confidence, access, or aspiration. From an institutional perspective, these individual experiences accumulate into reputational capital and student satisfaction. From a student perspective, alumni can make the future feel more concrete and less distant.

Discussion: From Events to Culture

The central lesson of the KTU case is that alumni relations should not be understood as a department only. The presentation states that alumni relations is a culture (Drășuț, 2026). This distinction matters. A department can coordinate, communicate, and administer; however, a culture exists when faculties, students, alumni, university leaders, and partners all recognize alumni engagement as part of the university's identity. A culture of alumni engagement is visible when alumni are invited into classrooms, students are introduced to alumni benefits during introductory week, faculties host alumni interviews, career events include alumni-led companies, and ceremonies mark the transition from student to alumnus or alumna.

This cultural approach also changes the meaning of alumni loyalty. Loyalty is not produced by institutional messaging alone. It is produced when people repeatedly experience usefulness, recognition, emotional attachment, and shared purpose. KTU's traditions and activity formats create multiple entry points for these experiences. A recent graduate may join through a coffee chat; an established professional may contribute through mentorship; a senior leader may become a donor, speaker, or role model; a global alumnus may carry the university name internationally and open opportunities abroad. This variety is consistent with alumni engagement research, which shows that graduates support institutions through multiple profiles of involvement rather than through a single behaviour (Weerts & Ronca, 2007, 2008).

Another lesson concerns coordination. The KTU case does not romanticise alumni engagement as something that happens naturally. It explicitly notes that without coordination, alumni engagement is not working, while a dedicated team makes it strategic (Drășuț, 2026). This is a practical warning for institutions that assume alumni goodwill will automatically turn into engagement. Goodwill must be invited, organised, remembered, and connected to meaningful opportunities. A dedicated alumni coordinator or centre can map alumni segments, maintain communication, support faculty initiatives, preserve institutional memory, and ensure that activities are connected rather than isolated.

Finally, the KTU case suggests that alumni engagement contributes to the university's educational mission. Alumni activities are not separate from learning; they extend learning into professional, social, and civic contexts. Guest lectures, shadowing, competitions, and mentoring help students understand the relationship between curriculum and practice. Traditions and ceremonies help them understand the relationship between individual achievement and community belonging. In this sense, alumni engagement is a form of extended pedagogy.

Practical Framework for Higher Education Institutions

Based on the KTU case, a practical framework for alumni engagement can be summarised in five steps. First, define alumni inclusively. Institutions should recognise not

only traditional degree graduates but also recent graduates, senior leaders, global alumni, professional study graduates, exchange participants, and microcredential learners. Second, begin early. Students should encounter alumni from the first weeks of study through introductory events, stories, social media, guest lectures, and networking opportunities.

Third, create a diversified engagement portfolio. A strong alumni programme should include both formal and informal formats: mentoring, career talks, lectures, case competitions, volunteering, networking, faculty reunions, recognition events, and experiential initiatives such as workplace shadowing. Fourth, institutionalise traditions. Events that repeat annually or monthly become social anchors and build collective memory. Fifth, coordinate strategically. Alumni engagement requires data, communication, relationship management, evaluation, and cooperation between university units and alumni-led structures.

This framework is scalable. Smaller institutions may begin with one faculty reunion, one mentorship pilot, and one storytelling platform. Larger institutions may develop segmented engagement strategies for recent graduates, senior leaders, international alumni, donors, and industry partners. The key principle is continuity: students should not experience alumni as distant guests, and alumni should not feel that graduation ended their relationship with the institution.

Limitations and Directions for Further Development

As an applied case study, this paper is based on the KTU presentation rather than on a full empirical evaluation of alumni outcomes. Consequently, it should be read as a practice-oriented framework, not as a statistical assessment of causal impact. Future research could strengthen the model by collecting longitudinal evidence on student participation, alumni volunteering, mentoring outcomes, employer links, and post-graduation loyalty. Such data would help distinguish which engagement formats create awareness, which generate active participation, and which lead to sustained institutional commitment.

Further development could also examine how engagement differs across alumni segments. Recent graduates may need career-oriented contact and informal networks, senior leaders may respond to strategic advisory roles, and global alumni may contribute through international visibility and mobility opportunities. Segment-sensitive evaluation would make it possible to preserve the warmth of community traditions while improving the precision of relationship management.

Conclusion

The KTU alumni engagement case demonstrates that effective alumni relations are built through early engagement, meaningful activities, strong traditions, and dedicated coordination. Alumni matter because they strengthen reputation, employability, resources, knowledge exchange, and networks. Yet their greatest value may be cultural: they show students what is possible and remind graduates that they remain part of a living academic community.

The most powerful statement in the presentation is that the best alumni programme is one where alumni do not feel like they left but feel like they stayed (Draşutë, 2026). This idea reframes alumni engagement from post-graduation communication into lifelong belonging. When alumni see themselves in current students, and students see their future selves in

alumni, the university community sustains itself across generations. From day one to lifelong, alumni engagement is therefore not only about events. It is about shaping identity, creating traditions that endure, and building futures through relationships that continue long after graduation.

References

1. CASE. (2018). Alumni engagement metrics: A framework and survey. Council for Advancement and Support of Education.
2. Drasutė, V. (2026, May 7-8). Engaging pre-alumni and alumni through alumni activities and traditions: KTU real case [Conference presentation]. ICAReAlumni 2026, Kaunas, Lithuania.
3. Drezner, N. D. (2011). Philanthropy and fundraising in American higher education. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 37(2), 1-155.
4. McAlexander, J. H., Koenig, H. F., & Schouten, J. W. (2006). Building relationships of brand community in higher education: A strategic framework for university advancement. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 23(2), 107-118. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2006.01.001>
5. Schlesinger, W., Cervera, A., & Pérez-Cabañero, C. (2017). Sticking with your university: The importance of satisfaction, trust, image, and shared values. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(12), 2178-2194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1136613>
6. Weerts, D. J., & Ronca, J. M. (2007). Profiles of supportive alumni: Donors, volunteers, and those who 'do it all'. *International Journal of Educational Advancement*, 7(1), 20-34. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.ijea.2150044>
7. Weerts, D. J., & Ronca, J. M. (2008). Characteristics of alumni donors who volunteer at their alma mater. *Research in Higher Education*, 49(3), 274-292. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-007-9077-0>