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ISSUES OF ESTABLISHING SYSTEMIC COMMUNICATIONS WITH ALUMNI (ON THE MATERIALS OF SPBSTU)

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Abstract

Communities of University Graduates have a special position in the communication system of Universities. These communities connect education, science and society, and they play key communication role for generations, knowledge and practice. Also they demonstrate the competitiveness of the University and affect the brand characteristics. The key aspects of interaction between Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University and its graduates were detected as results of research. The features of interaction between graduates and the University, ways of possible communication and key value, identification and practice-oriented interests of respondents in relation to the University were revealed in the opinion poll. The results show us that it is important to find new forms of communication, which include professional connections with university graduates and let alumni to participate in university's everyday life as specialists, as people, who really represent the professional community. Also alumni are interested both in commercial and uncommercial communications with university. As well we may say that the key factor of alumni's interest in alma mater is communication with new generation of student as new generation of specialists. Alumni prefer roles in communication, which let them play expert role, to be employer of graduates or to take care about practice of students Analysis of results became the basis of University contemporary corporate culture creation and established the other forms of interaction in graduate's community, including the Endowment Fund.

1. Introduction

The issues of Universities interaction with target audiences are interesting during the formation of new relations with the state, business and society (Kobicheva, 2018). The category of graduates is particularly interesting. Implementation of various initiatives in relation to graduates takes a variety of forms, but most often by traditional institutions as "Alumni Clubs" and "Endowment Funds". International practice is based on effective historical experience, where graduates play a variety of roles in the life of the institution they have graduated from (Mael & Ashforth,1992; Weerts & Ronca, 2008).

2. Problem Statement

The issues of interaction between graduates and the parent University are interesting not only from the point of view of the problem of preserving the scientific schools continuity, the formation of stable social relations, direct contact between research and educational centers and business, society, the state, but also to solve specific problems the modern University faces. In this regard, responsible and effective work with graduates and the creation of tools for interaction with them is an integral part of the modern communication process of universities with external target audiences in the regional, national and global scale. Issue of graduates' integration in various cooperations with the University, is a common phenomenon around the world (Khanna, Jacob & Chopra, 2019).

Specialized endowment funds are particularly interesting. They are created on the basis of the graduates clubs formation and motivated by their desire to develop Alma mater. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) is a successful example of such cooperation. Massachusetts Institute of technology was established in 1862, and in 1875 there was an Alumni Association, which actively participated in the financial life of its native University (MIT Alumni Association, n. d.). In 2013, the graduates' Association of the Massachusetts Institute of technology consisted of 126 thousand people, the Inspection committees included 450 members (Kiktenko, 2013).

The format of the graduates' community organization and work with them developed both in the international and Russian market of educational services. Contemporary Russian higher education is in a constant process of change, including issues related to the participation of graduates in the life of the University. They are connected with the University on an emotional level through the brand and are most suitable for solving the problems of positioning and promoting the services of the University, especially through an increasingly relevant system of contacts ranging from "Alumni Clubs" to Endowment Funds - the most popular form in leading Russian Universities (Razumnyj, 2018). In the Russian Federation, the active development of this format of associations on the basis of educational, cultural and scientific institutions was facilitated by the adoption of the Federal law of Russian Federation No. 275 (2006) "On Procedure of Establishment and Use of Endowment for Designated Purpose by Non-Commercial Organizations".

3. Research Questions

Implementation of various initiatives in relation to these subjects takes a variety of forms, but most often on the basis of historically established institutions "Alumni Clubs" and "Endowment Funds". International practice is based on effective historical experience, where graduates play a variety of roles

in the life of the institution they have graduated from. *"Each of them allows the institution, as well as its students and alumni, to form a common identity. This cultural identity is valuable to the individual student and likely pushes him to finish the degree, to stay connected, and to donate to the university after graduation"* (Vidal & Pittz, 2018).

The classical format of «interest clubs» is changing to the sustainable organizational structures aimed at the implementation of a wide variety of activities such as consulting services, creation of special funds to encourage young talents, implementation of large infrastructure projects, fundraising (Proper, 2009), university branding (McAlexander, Koenig, & Schouten, 2005). The indirect influence is also investigated – for example: Peer Review Ratings and Selection Success Rate in National Research (Jang, Doh, Kang, & Han, 2017).

The organization of contacts with graduates should be based on the need to find the necessary formats that will allow all participants to define common goals and mutually realize their own interests. Issues regarding the graduates' loyalty formation are considered in detail in the article "An Integrative Model of Alumni Loyalty—an Empirical Validation Among Graduates From German and Russian Universities" (Iskhakova, Hilbert, & Hoffmann, 2016). Issues of loyalty and involvement in the alumni community are investigated in the Maria L. Gallo (2013) work based on the materials of the Irish university (Gallo, 2013).

The issues of graduates' support of the University economic well-being and the formation of endowment funds are studied in the research "Hail to Thee, Our Alma Mater: Alumni Role Identity and the Relationship to Institutional Support Behaviors" (McDearmon, 2013).

Moreover, uniting graduates from different countries, universities and international educational activities become a system element of the reproduction of the positive image of the country and act as one of the smart power tools and public diplomacy (Unangst, 2018).

4. Purpose of the Study

Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University was founded on February 19, 1899 and opened in 1902. In 1910 the first graduates created the first Association – "Graduates' Society of the St. Petersburg Polytechnic Institute of Emperor Peter the Great". During more than a century of University graduates' and teachers' history it was created many associations and formats of interaction (105 Years of Unity, 2019). In 2012 the Endowment Fund of Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University was established (Endowment fund of SPbPU, n. d.). In June 2014, the largest meeting of University graduates took place within the "Forum of graduates and friends of SPBPU". There it was decided to create a common environment related to the development of communication between graduates and the University. "Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University Alumni and Friends Association", established in 2014 after 105 years from its first alumni association, keeps the traditions of its predecessors (Rudskoy, 2015).

Structures for work with graduates, also actively interact with public associations at the national and global level, and are members of the World Association of University Graduates, (n. d.), Russia.

Within the framework of the "Forum of graduates and friends of SPbPU" on June 5-6, 2014, the research group included the authors of this paper conducted extensive work on the analysis of the most important factors and ways of graduates' possible interaction with the University. This research became

the basis for the formation of the modern approach to work with graduates of Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University.

5. Research Methods

The method is opinion poll of university graduates at a special meeting in university. In the result of survey 176 people were polled by random sampling (each third person, who left the meeting). The research was applied and had practical goals. The questions in questionnaire were related to goals such as the analysis of distribution of respondents depending on their interest in the Forum by year of graduation and gender, the distribution of participants according to their preferences, the form of cooperation with the university and the format of the forum event at the university.

Mathematical methods of analysis, which were used: calculation of percentage distributions, correlation analysis, crosstabs, chi-square test.

6. Findings

Investigations in communication require special attention in terms of verifying the results. For better understanding of processes in surveyed company, authors proceed from the need to conduct a study with two key dates: 2014 year is a year when institutions of feedback started to function, and 2019 year, as the time period, which is proper for evaluating of effectiveness of functioning structures. In this article we consider the first step if investigation and discussion about working with alumni, which became a base for future investigation in 2019. The necessity of opinion poll in 2014 based on the fact, that in result of study was realized the conception of communication with alumni. Today it functions on the base of SPbPU (June 2019). Respondents of 2014 year study became the target audience, which was included to the process of communication between university and alumni and became the ground for forming of long term relationships.

In order to study the attitude of university graduates to interaction with their alma mater, we conducted a survey on June 5, 2014 among the participants of the graduate's forum (the result - 176 interviews). The survey results were used, among other things, to analyze how university graduates assess the prospects for cooperation with alma mater, if they are interested in maintaining contacts with the university, and if it is so, which kinds of contacts. The following results were obtained during the survey.
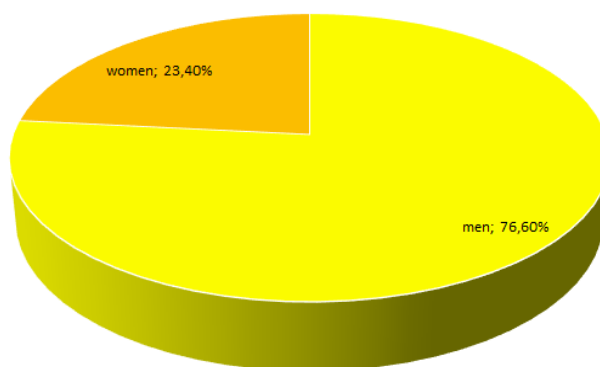

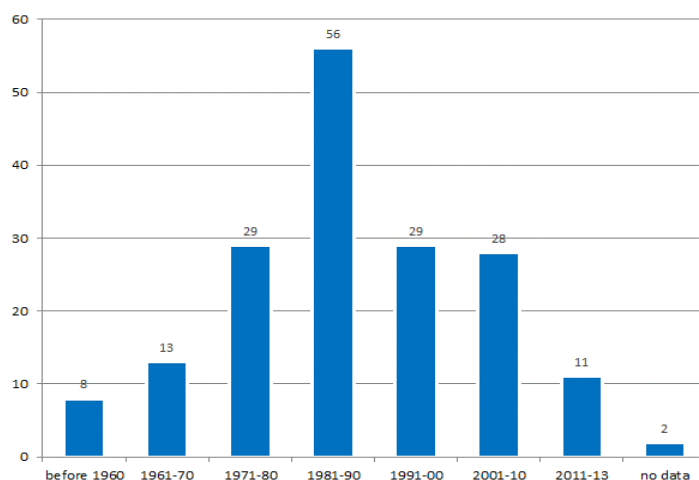**Figure 01.** Distribution of respondents by gender

Figure 02. Distribution of respondents by year of graduation

6.1. As we see on Figure 1, among the participants of the event there were more men (77%) then women (23 %). This kind of ratio reflects the dominance of male students when studying at a technical institute.

6.2. Years of graduation ranged from 1955 to 2013, and more than half of the graduates who took part in the survey graduated from high school in 1986 and later (Figure 2).

6.3. It should be noted that cooperation with the university is an interesting aspect of communication for some graduates; however, frequent meetings of graduates are undesirable for the majority of respondents. Thus, the answers to the question about the desired frequency of graduates meetings were as follows: in the aggregate, 61% of respondents spoke for meetings once every 5 years and less often, 23% for meetings once every 2-4 years, 3% for meetings once a year and 14% for meetings more than once a year. However, when answering the question about the most interesting forms of interaction with the university, 73% chose the answer "meetings with graduates and students". Perhaps we should not have combined meetings with graduates and students in one answer.

6.4. The construction of crosstabs made it possible to notice that the greatest interest (31.8%) in the meeting was shown by graduates who graduated the university 29-38 years ago, this category of graduates has significant work experience and established positions in companies and organizations, however some of them are very close to the retirement age. In general, it was such category that became the basis for the formation of the university community, and also showed a high degree of interest in organizing an endowment fund (Association of graduates and friends of SPbPU, n. d.).
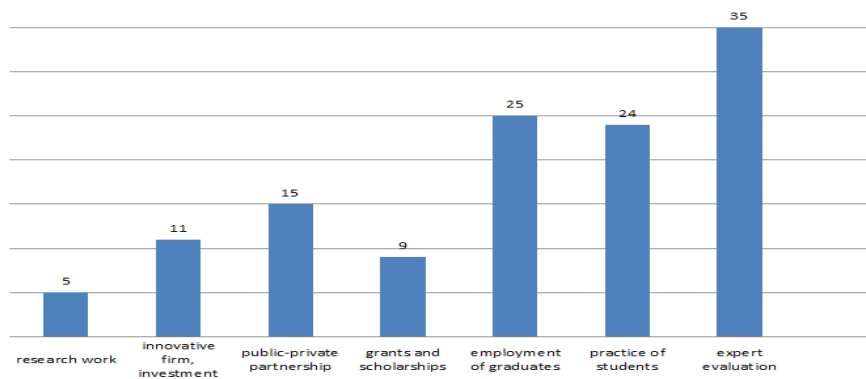
Figure 03. Distribution of respondents according to the forms of cooperation with the university
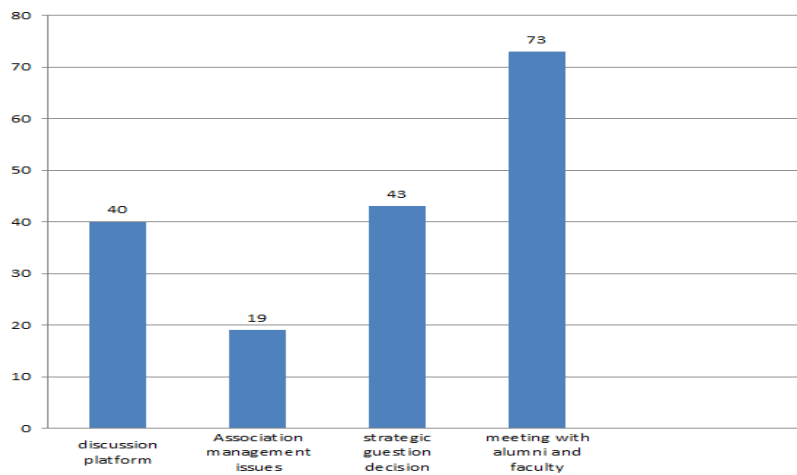

Figure 04. Distribution of respondents by event format preferences

6.5. Also, as we see on Figure 3, graduates were offered other forms of interaction with the university, with each other and with students. The leaders among the preferred forms of cooperation are expert role (35%), employment of graduates (25%) and practice of students (24%), i.e. types of interactions that do not require financial input from a business, but may be useful to it. With such forms of interaction, business can either earn money by speaking as an expert, or gain access to young and talented graduates, selecting employees for the team. This, in particular, testifies to the underdevelopment of cooperation between the scientific and business communities, since entrepreneurs are ready to receive from these cooperation only short-term benefits and are not willingly engaged in long-term projects.

6.6. Among the additional forms of cooperation (individual responses of opinion poll participant) were listed: participation in mass events; management of promising areas of metallurgy; organizing large conferences and congresses; information and publishing environment; participation in joint projects; holding "Evenings in the Polytechnic"; joint educational programs; creation of a system of charitable patents for invention; training and retraining of experts, etc.

6.7. The most convenient format of the event was the meeting with alumni and students – 73%, in second place, with a significant lag, making decisions on strategic issues – 43%, using SPbPU's graduates meetings as a discussion platform – 40% (Figure 4).

6.8. Also it should be noted that the most preferred channel of communication with the university, which prompted graduates to come to the meeting, was the personal invitation of the rector (37%), as well as information from teachers or SPbPU's workers (33%). Only 25% received the invitation from other graduates and 12% found out about the meeting from the university's website. This suggests that graduates rarely visit the site, and personal contacts are the basis of communication with the university for them. But in the age of digital technology - this is not the most effective form in terms of coverage and labor costs. To form a positive attitude to communication with the university, it is necessary to develop modern communication channels, making the interesting content of the website not only for students, but also for graduates.

6.9. We can also offer the following additional interaction formats (they are based on the individual answers of the respondents to the open questions of the questionnaire):

1) ensuring contact;

2) public lectures of prominent graduates;

3) the development of the country;

4) discussion of the current state and possibilities of cooperation;

5) problems of the country's development, the contribution of polytechnics;

6) any;

7) implementation of own projects;

8) proposals for scientific and technical developments;

9) international projects and cooperation;

10) expert work in committees.

Thus, we can conclude that graduates still have an interest in contacts with the university, they are ready to work with students, including transferring knowledge and experience to them, and helping in finding employment. But we also see the presence of communicative problems in the interaction of graduates with the university and the need for more active work on informing graduates about the possibilities of contacts with the university. Also, we can make a conclusion, that corporate culture of SPbPU graduates is not actually formed now. The graduates feel themselves separate from their alma mater. We need more communicational channels, more possibilities for cooperation to help this process of corporate culture formation.

The survey was conducted among graduates of the St. Petersburg Polytechnic University, who attended the special event, which was dedicated to the meeting of Peter the Great SPbPU graduates. Representatives of all existing departments of different graduation years were invited. The authors believe that the opinion of those who came to the event can be regarded as the opinion of people who are not indifferent to their Alma mater. They can be university's target audience. It is also interesting how the communication with them was established at the initial stage. The measurement of alumni's attention showed the following:

1. During the discussion, the authors came to the conclusion that graduates, who have already graduated from the university for a considerable time, work, build their lives, have a considerable interest in participating in such associations and activities. They begin to feel an interest in their past, in students, in connections, only after a certain, sufficiently long time. It is equally important that the fact of meeting and returning to youth, for successful people, leads to a search for the values that they are ready to present within the competitive communication model existing in youth communities. It serves as a good background for creating an atmosphere conducive to collective decision-making, as well as sponsorship and charitable operations.

2. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the intensity of modern life does not allow young people to take an active interest in what remains in the past, and a return to old ties becomes possible only at an older age. We can also make a hypothesis that the values of friendship, students, memory of the past, etc. were higher among past generations of graduates, among people who socialized in Soviet reality. If this hypothesis is confirmed, then it makes sense to take this into account when we are building communications and organizing educational work at a higher educational institution today. We can contribute to the formation of new values, love and respect for the university, which graduates students into adult life and gives them a profession. Probably, in the era of paid education, when students feel that they are not members of the "student fraternity", but "customers of services", their attitude should be subject to some adjustment by the university, by the efforts of those structures and people who are directly involved in communication with students and in educational work - by the union, by the curators of student groups, etc.

3. From the point of view of assessing communication needs, a desire was identified to use the annual format with the involvement of university management and specialized institutions in these meetings, which led to the formation and development of the triad in the form of the SPbPU Development Target Capital Fund, the association of graduates and friends of SPbPU (July 2014) and the Center for alumni SPbPU (July 2014).

The Center for Work with Alumni became the point of coordination for interaction with alumni and accepted the mission of their consolidation, preservation and enhancement of corporate culture. Also, this unit is working to improve the image of Peter the Great SPbPU and increasing competitiveness in the global community of universities (Alumni center of SPbPU, n. d.).

The presence of sponsorship, public and organizational level in communications with graduates requires the authors of further research to assess the effectiveness of these activities and successes in the work with graduates and the formation of corporate culture. The connection between these areas is confirmed by studies conducted on the basis of Rey Juan Carlos University (Madrid) (Del-Castillo-Feito, Blanco-González, & González-Vázquez, 2019).

7. Conclusion

The formation of graduates' corporate culture is an important problem of modern educational sphere. The reason of the problem significance is connected with the fact that the university needs its graduates. The formation of professional competencies of students requires, among other things, direct interpersonal communication with professionals who are currently active in their profession. At the same

time, if this professional graduated from the same university as the student, this can be an additional motivating factor for students to improve the knowledge and skills of their future profession. But for this it is necessary to maintain contacts with graduates on an ongoing basis, monitoring their professional career, and keeping favorable relations with them.

The authors identify possible forms of interaction based on common interests:

1. Creation of an alumni community with the aim of maintaining stable social relationships, teacher/student, family/individual;

2. Group solidarity based on self-identification with the University;

3. Formation and preservation of the corporate culture of the University;

4. Transfer of successful socialization experience from one generation to another, through the return of the descendants of graduates to the University, which parents graduated from;

5. Formation of interest groups, industry and business communities on the basis of the graduated generation, direction of training, belonging to a course and campus;

6. Recruitment of new scientific and teaching staff from former graduates;

7. Formation of a sustainable University brand;

8. Creation of interested and loyal to the University lobbying structures and individual preferences;

9. Formation of a new competence-based feedback between the real sector graduates and a focus on the educational standards of structures of the University;

10. Creation of endowment funds on the basis of sponsorship and philanthropy of graduates;

11. Impact on the labor market, retraining and student practices on the basis of mutual interest, loyalty and support of graduates;

12. Organization of special events and platforms for the formation of useful links and public, business activity;

13. Formation of an expert pool of graduates on issues relevant to the University;

14. Implementation of scientific, research and consulting activities on a commercial basis in the interests of graduates and their business.

In contemporary conditions the scheme applicant - student – graduate is not completed after graduation from bachelor`s or master`s degree. Any graduate in terms of effective interaction with him can become a customer, partner, employee and legal representative of the applicant.

At the same time, the format of interaction should not be one-sided, communication between the University and the graduate is mutually beneficial. Graduates are the main result of the University. The human capital is the most valuable resource in this case. For universities, graduates become an indicator of success in the global competition, suppliers and intermediaries in the process of obtaining new staff, resources, ideas and popularity.

Graduate unions are just such a tool that allows to establish and maintain contacts with former university students, as well as engage them in interaction with each other and with students. In the result of survey, we can conclude that graduates still have an interest in contacts with the university; they are ready to work with students, including transferring knowledge and experience to them, and helping in finding employment. However, the active work of the university as an organization to establish

communication with graduates is necessary, since it is obvious that only the alma mater can play the leading role here. Individuals, for their part, cannot create an appropriate communication space.

Modern universities seek independent sources of income, try to create effective communication with target audiences and aim to increase competitiveness. Working with graduates based on graduates' meetings as feedback, the formation of loyalty and communities of sponsors and benefactors became the most important mechanism for the formation of a new culture of relationships. Only at the beginning of the 21st century, Russian universities regained the opportunity to create endowment funds and began to actively attract their graduates to cooperate. SPbPU forms communications with alumni on the basis of three institutions - the Target Capital Fund, Alumni Association and Peter the Great SPbPU Friends and a specialized center for working with alumni. This triad arose also on the basis of the data obtained as a result of the research presented in this article.

The research team suggests the next stage of research into the features of the functioning of the system of feedback institutions with graduates at the base of Peter the Great St. Petersburg State University in the autumn of 2019.

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