

Needed For India's Leap Into The Future – More Robust Alumni Associations

Who does not like to take a stroll down memory lane? And if it's your mother institution where you learnt your basic ropes, honed your skills and developed your instinctive wisdom, then the sense of nostalgic association is that much stronger. The place that once meant home to you, fellow students that were family and faculty that symbolised elderly sanctity – when these sentiments inundate one's perceptive self, an ex-student is automatically drawn to his alma mater.

Nostalgia is a powerful feeling. Its influence can be harnessed into many robust forms. The phrase '*the good old days*' can not only be a soothing balm to a forlorn soul but can also be immensely beneficial to an institution.

The mother institution holds a special and a permanent place in the heart of every alumnus. This cherished charm entices every former student to return to his alma mater regularly, interact with the current crop of students, the faculty, and revisit the nooks and corners that contributed to one's professional attainments. Not just that, many owe their marital bliss to the arrows shot by the winged cupid at such places. Friends earned here are known to keep company life-long. Reunions, therefore, don't just promote fellowship and networking, they become a means to stir a complete emotional catharsis.

It's pertinent to realise alumni don't just reflect the past of an institution; they are very much a part of its present and are an important link to its future. India is just about waking up to the importance of alumni associations. Now that we are seeing the benefits accruing from alumni networks in

Western institutions, we must replicate those successful models of Common Weal to help ourselves. It is however very encouraging that premium institutions across the country like the IITs, IIMs and many medical colleges are now networking with their alumni to build powerful associations.



It would be instructive here to know how the western world has been able to derive the advantage of alumni networks for over a century now. The US Alumni, for instance, contributed \$12.15 billion to their alma maters in 2018. That was 26% of all support

received during that fiscal year, just a shade less than the support received from various foundations (30%). At the very top was the Princeton University Alumni association, New Jersey, which contributed 49.8 % of financial support. These funds help institutions to build top-class campus infrastructure, employ the best faculty and make available cutting-edge learning technologies.

Many seats of higher education in India are run by the government or public corporations. Most of their budgetary provisions are earmarked for more basic public needs, thereby neglecting the health of educational institutes. This is where the alumni can chip in with their contributions, thereby sharing the financial burden of their mother institutions.

Very crucial to the formation of an alumni association is the support it offers to students with limited financial means. The sad part is that even if they were able to raise money for their education, they do not have enough to partake of two square meals or buy books and learning aids. These students

need scholarships or financial aid in any form. Many alumni associations are already extending help for this cause. But their numbers at present are not enough.



One sentiment that runs common through alumni wishlists is the welfare of ex-faculty. Retired teachers and support staff require some degree of financial assistance and ancillary services like health and social support. Alumni associations of medical schools can play an effective role in keeping their ex-teachers and trainers in good health.

Research and development (R&D), unfortunately, has remained the Cinderella of our education system. Though an essential element, it continues to be the most neglected area in India.

While India's investment in R&D has shown an increasing trend over the years, it is just a fraction of the country's GDP, remaining constant at around 0.6 to 0.7 %. This is way below the expenditure in countries like the United States (2.8 %), China (2.1 %), Israel (4.3 %) and Korea (4.2 %). It is for this very reason that we do not have enough original thinkers and innovators who can help the country leap into the future. An important concomitant of this lack of initiative on home ground is that the Western world, with its enabling environment, has become a happy province for contemporary research.

This national fault zone needs to be addressed on an urgent

basis. Indian alumni settled abroad can play a major role in meeting this challenge by offering knowledge inputs and financial help to facilitate the setting up of world-class research facilities in this country. Similarly, guest lectures and transfer of teaching techniques can be of immense help to institutions in India. Many Indian alumni today occupy distinguished seats in Western universities. They yearn to transfer their knowledge and technological know-how to India. It is for us to tap this potential resource pool and make optimal use of it. The Internet has only made this job easier – a professor sitting in his office in a western university can lecture students in Indian classrooms.



The 'Students Exchange Programme' is another zone that needs to be tapped. There are a large number of Indians who are programme directors, deans or occupy influential positions in Western universities and companies and can easily facilitate exchanges.

Needless to say, such interactions will open a whole new world for budding students. Placement for higher studies or gainful employment is always a fierce struggle for Indian students as there is very little networking or a system in place that can assist. Here again, the influential alumnus can fill the vacuum.

The purpose of any alumni association is to promote the welfare of its alma mater and establish a mutually beneficial relationship with it. They assist their mother institutions to benefit from their skill, experience and financial resource and are the most loyal supporters and best ambassadors of their parent portals of learning. Ergo, it is imperative to keep them engaged constructively at a personal and

professional level as they will always be ready to 'care and share'. It is now up to us to get them on board!