

Universities assist alumni in job search

A recent wave of alumni events has hit the UAE as universities and graduates seek to establish mutually beneficial relationships to secure employment during difficult economic times

- By Rania Moussl, Staff Reporter
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The global economic downturn has seen large numbers of alumni return to their alma maters for help with job hunts and retraining.

In the UAE there has also been a significant increase in the number of alumni reconnecting with their institutions as reported by the American University in Dubai (AUD) and the University of Wollongong in Dubai (UOWD), among others. The alumni are particularly interested in utilising the career services and counselling offices, services some students did not know existed until after they graduated.

"I have had over 500 alumni update their contact information since I took this position in April 2009," said Sherri Van Over, alumni officer at UOWD. "We have also had an influx of alumni using our career services programmes for career counselling and job placement," she added.

"All universities somehow give back to their alumni and career services is the biggest way," said Peggy Awad, external relations manager at AUD. "The alumni didn't know it [career services] existed before they graduated because they weren't seeking jobs and, like typical students, they don't identify the need for something until absolutely necessary," she added.

Why now?

Since higher education institutions in the UAE are barely two decades old, most have yet to establish fully fledged alumni associations. Also, the metropolitan and transitional nature of expatriates in the UAE makes it difficult for universities to track all their graduates university officials say.

However, a recent wave of alumni activities has been held across the country. "I think a major reason is because people are more comfortable hiring someone they know or have a background with," said Dr Vinod Prabhu, Institute of Management Technology alumnus. "Alumni are usually active during such periods because it's about using your contacts in times of need," he added.

Prabhu went on to say that during periods of good economic growth, firms actively seek out employees through recruitment agencies and other such services.

In times of economic difficulty companies' top management looks to cut costs. "Yet certain areas in companies keep growing and it is these areas that make the company viable. [Therefore, management] hires through known sources, such as alumni contacts," he said.

Similarly, graduates may look to re-establish connections with their universities during a market slump to tap into alumni networks and career support available, especially if they have been made redundant. "In times like this, alumni can increase their skills-set and knowledge to make them more marketable when the economic climate picks up," said Theresa Dzendrowskyj, head of alumni relations at Cass Business School.

Cass launched its MBA programme at the Dubai International Financial Centre, Centre of Excellence, in 2007 with a cohort of 30. Dzendrowskyj reported Cass Dubai's student body has grown steadily over the last two years. Admissions for 2010 were up by almost 70 per cent, exemplifying the professional demand for requalification.

Ash Athawale is a senior alumnus at Cass and a senior consultant at a leading international recruitment firm in Dubai. He said this year alone he has helped nearly 30 of his fellow alumni with job searches, be it for employment or recruitment.

"I know the quality of education Cass has imparted to me," said Athwale.

He said employees or recruiters may not trust a recruitment agency to source candidates or placements of relevance, however, as a fellow alumnus he is automatically trusted.

He went on to say in the case of job seekers: "I become friends with them and continue to guide them through their careers."

Haneen Fareed, an information technology bachelor's graduate and MBA student, feels she had been missing out on valuable opportunities before the recent Abu Dhabi University (ADU) alumni meet she attended. "I was missing the opportunity of getting advice on my career," she said. "Being in contact with ADU alumni will help me find the right job," she added.

Getting back out there

For this reason, graduates find it is not just what the university can do for them in the job search but also the relationships and potential networking opportunities available to them through their alumni associations which can help them with both employment and recruitment.

ADU launched its alumni association in January and recently held its first alumni meeting which drew close to 1,500 former students. It is only now that the administration has developed and launched a brand new interactive website dedicated to all ADU alumni, including a careers guidance section.

They are not alone in their slow start. Mahatma Gandhi University, Dubai, is still in the process of forming its alumni association while Dubai Women's College is restructuring its association, set to launch formally later this year.

Whether in full swing or not, alumni associations have clearly been identified by universities and graduates in the UAE as a significant and successful way of placing professionals back into the job market during difficult economic times.

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