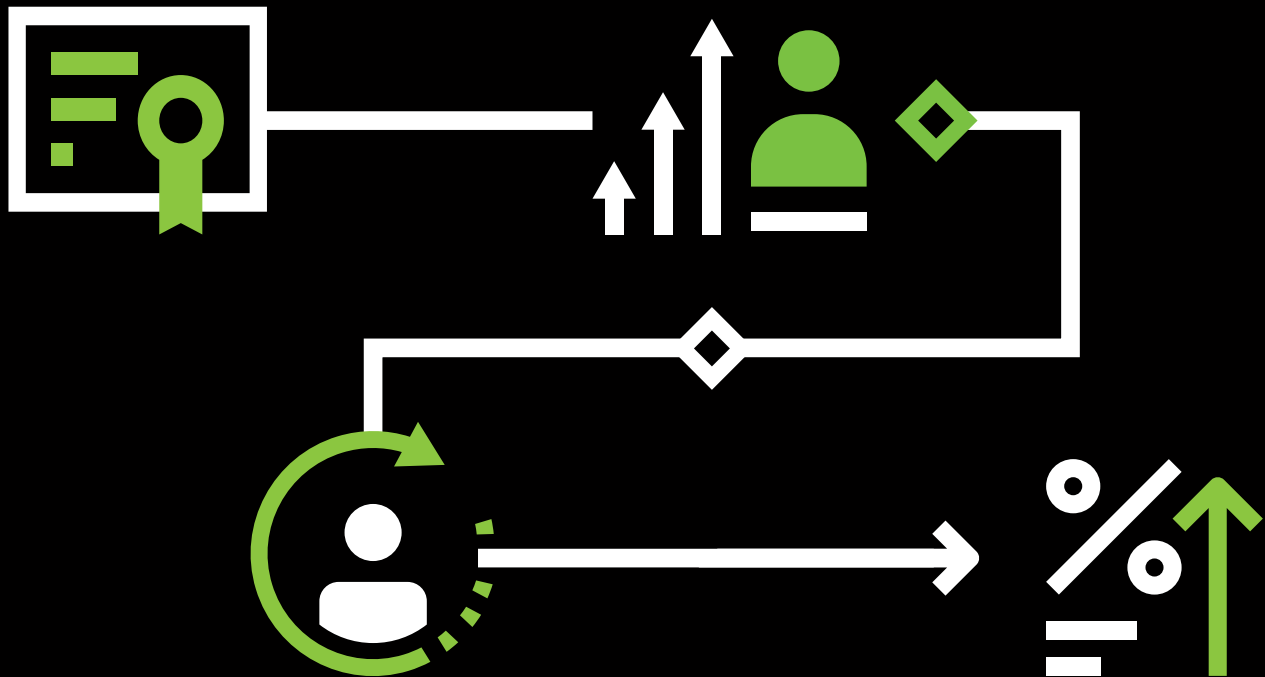


# Alumni Engagement in Ireland: **Current state of, and opportunities to foster, engagement and financial support**



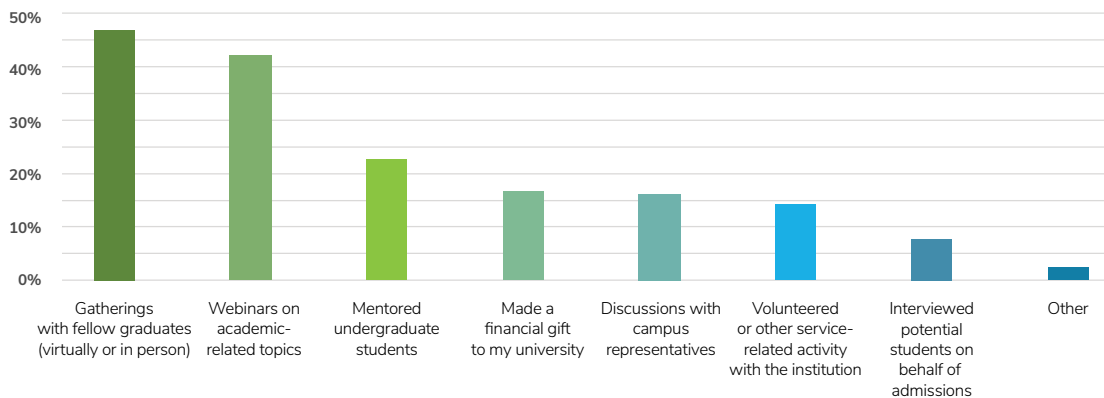
The pandemic impacted how universities engaged and supported their graduates virtually. Given a continued focus on increasing engagement to build long-term relationships with the university, Anthology conducted a survey on alumni engagement trends to help universities in Ireland better understand the level of interest in engaging with their university and opportunities to adjust strategies for engagement and communications during this time and in the new normal. The survey targeted adults residing in Ireland who had earned at least a bachelor’s degree.

Of the more than 600 respondents to the survey, more than one in two indicated they agree or strongly agree that they are interested in continuing to engage with their university after graduation, while about one in four were neutral, with only one in five indicating that they are not interested in engaging. Overall, this is a good indication of interest in engagement after graduation – and also that there is a relatively large population (about 25%) – those who are neutral about engagement – who could likely be engaged with the right strategies.

## Current Alumni Engagement

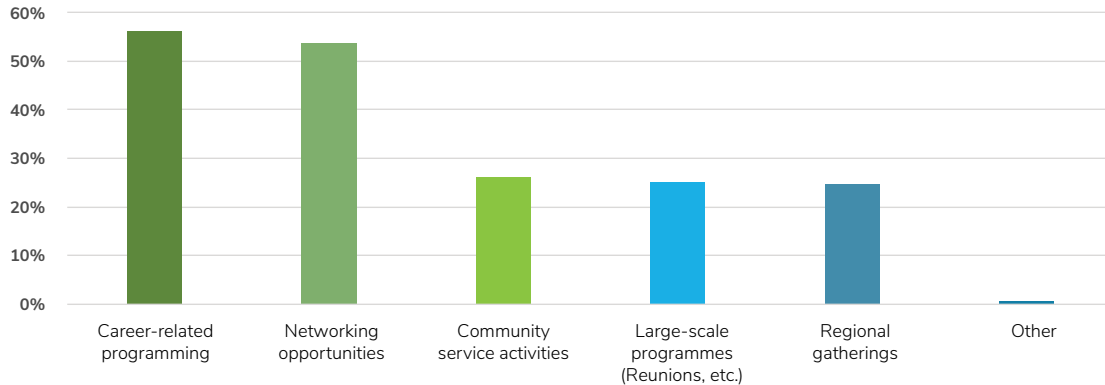
Typically, a key part of alumni engagement and fundraising efforts focus on alumni programmes to build relationships and increase attendee engagement. During the pandemic, these engagement opportunities became virtual. Among respondents, 41% participated in an alumni activity over the last year, with gatherings with classmates, whether virtual or in person, being the most popular. These were closely followed by webinars on academic-related topics, with over four in 10 of those who participated in an activity attending a webinar. Nearly one in four helped mentor a student, while interviewing potential students and volunteering were the least common.

### Alumni Activities Participated in



This provides indications of preferences among respondents. However, respondents were also asked about the types of programmes that would be of interest. Only one in five indicated that they were not interested in programming. Of those who expressed interest in programming, interest varied somewhat by type of programme, as seen below.

### Programmes of Interest

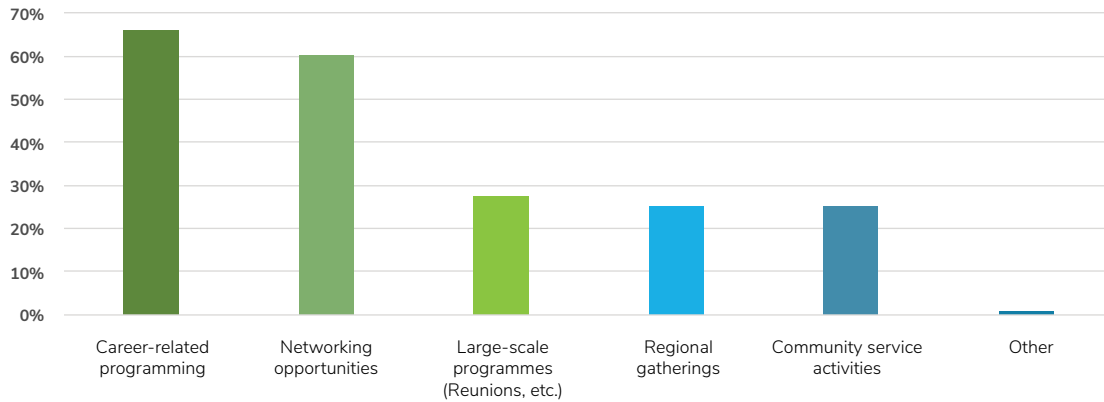


\* Limited to those respondents who expressed an interest in programmes. n=484

The programmes that garnered the highest interest were career-related programming and those focused on networking. There was less interest in other programming, with about one in four respondents indicating interest in each of the following: regional gatherings, community service activities, and large-scale programmes such as reunions. While there were differences by age range, networking and career-related programmes were the most popular until the age of 56 or above. Universities should identify ways to offer programming in these areas given the high interest for much of the population.

When focusing on the most recent graduates (between the ages of 21 and 30), a higher percentage at nine of 10 are interested in programmes. Two in three are interested in career-related programming, followed by six in 10 with interest in networking opportunities. As younger alumni express very high interest in these areas, universities should also consider programming specifically for this group focused on careers and networking.

## Programme Interest Among Respondents between 21 and 30 years of age



\* Limited to those respondents who indicated their age to be between 21 and 30 years old and who expressed interest in programming. n=123

As the world begins to emerge from the pandemic, alumni relations offices will need to adjust programming to match the interest of graduates both in terms of the types of programmes, but also how the programmes are offered. Among those interested in programming, there was a slight preference for virtual programmes (38%), compared to in-person programmes (32%), while 30% indicated they would attend either type of programme. Universities should therefore continue to offer virtual programming in addition to in-person programming to meet the preferences of alumni. This may mean offering fewer in-person programmes than prior to the pandemic to ensure that there is time for virtual programmes as well.

### Opportunities:

- Offer career-oriented programming, especially for those who graduated more recently.
- Highlight networking opportunities in any programmes offered.
- Review programme mix post-pandemic to ensure that virtual programmes continue to be offered.

## Interest in helping current students

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Another opportunity for alumni engagement is connecting graduates with current students, as two-thirds of respondents representing all ages indicated that they would be interested. The majority are interested in speaking with students about career-related information, followed by mentoring students, while a small percentage indicated interest in helping to support students financially. Alumni relations offices should continue to explore opportunities to connect alumni with students for career-related purposes.

When considering responses from recent alumni (those between the ages of 21 and 30) in particular, this group is even more interested in helping students. Three in four recent alumni expressed interest, with over one in two being open to speaking with students about careers, followed by more than one in three with interest in mentoring students. Universities should identify ways to involve recent alumni especially with current students to help better prepare them for life after graduation and provide alumni with additional ways to give back and stay engaged.

### Opportunities:

- Identify ways to connect interested alumni with current students, with a particular focus on career conversations.

## Email Communications – A key element of engagement

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Email is the most prevalent way to communicate with alumni and is a key element of any engagement and fundraising strategy. Four in 10 respondents indicated that they are not currently receiving emails from their university – this is a high percentage and highlights an opportunity to seek better email addresses for graduates. Given how much communication occurs via email, having valid email addresses is critical. Universities should seek email addresses prior to graduation and identify other ways to encourage alumni to provide email addresses, including reminders in communications highlighting the benefit of sharing an email address. Universities in Canada and the United States have seen success with campaigns on social media and via printed communications focusing on encouraging alumni to provide email addresses. Offering an incentive to all, or a few, individuals for providing this information has also been shown to increase the response rate.

Of those who receive emails from their university, most indicated receiving emails about once a year (26%), followed by those receiving emails once every three months (21%), and only about one in five indicated that they receive emails once a month. The smallest percentage of respondents indicated

receiving emails multiple times a week, at fewer than one in 10. Of these respondents, three in four indicated that this was too much communication. The majority of respondents in all other groups indicated that the frequency of emails was the right amount, whether they were receiving emails once a week or once a year. However, the highest percentage of those receiving one email per year (45%) indicated that this was not frequent enough (53% indicated it was the right amount).

Although responses did not indicate a want of more email communications, given that very few felt that they were being overcommunicated with, universities should increase communications to graduates if currently only emailing them infrequently. Universities should aim to email alumni once a month or more frequently, but less often than once a week based on results of the survey. This provides an opportunity to share additional information with alumni about the institution and opportunities to engage. However, the content must be relevant for those receiving it, otherwise communications will begin to be ignored. Universities should also assess whether the increased communications are resonating with constituents by reviewing open rates and the number of unsubscribes.

### **Opportunities:**

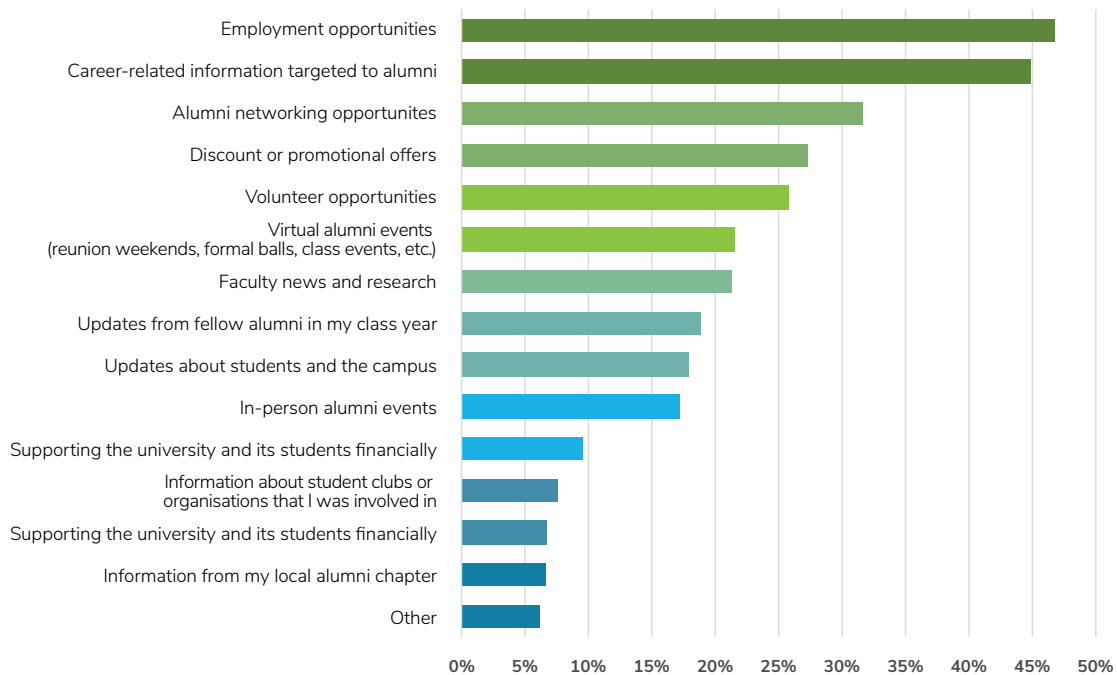
- Continue to seek ways to acquire more and better email addresses for graduates.
- Review email frequency and seek to increase communications to alumni to once a month or slightly more frequently, while also providing relevant content.

## **Content that resonates with alumni**

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In considering respondents who received at least one email from their university in the last twelve months, nearly two in three were satisfied or very satisfied with the content provided. This is an indication that generally the right content is being provided in communications, with only slightly more than one in 10 respondents expressing dissatisfaction with the content.

## Type of Content of Interest



n=604

Even though there is general satisfaction with communications, universities should continue to adjust and tailor content. Alumni indicated that they are currently most interested in information on employment opportunities (47%), career-related information for alumni (45%), alumni networking opportunities (32%), followed by discounts or promotional offers (27%), and volunteer opportunities (26%). There was notably less interest in information on virtual alumni events, faculty news and research, and updates from fellow alumni or information about students on campus, as well as about information related to supporting the university financially. The topics of high interest generally mirror the types of programmes with most interest and underscore the high interest in career-related information and networking. This information can be used to review and adjust communications to include more of this type of content, likely resulting in more engagement and connection to the institution.

As also seen in other parts of the survey, recent alumni have a stronger interest in career-related content, with 62% indicating interest in employment opportunities and 60% indicating interest in career-related information, followed by 38% who prefer information on networking opportunities. This is generally in line with the level of interest in these types of events among this population as well. More than one in three respondents among recent alumni also expressed interest in information about volunteer opportunities, which may present an additional opportunity.

## Opportunities:

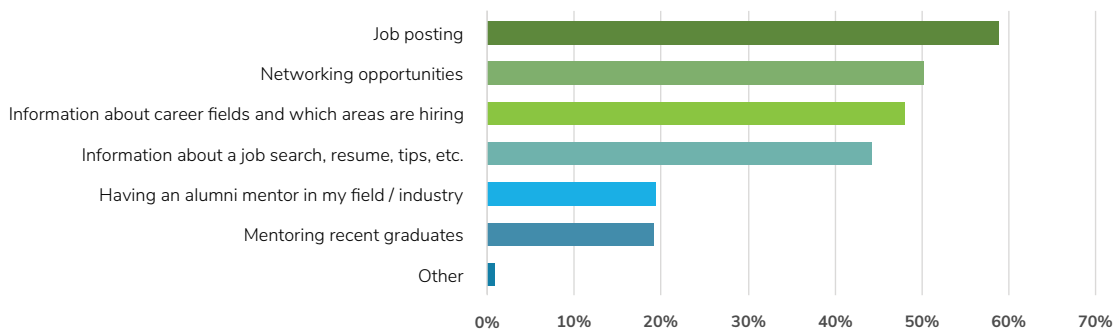
- Use the information to adjust communication strategies and tailor content to areas of interest.
- Consider developing some email communications specifically for recent graduates.

## Type of career information of interest

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Not surprisingly, when asked about the type of career information of interest, employment information garnered the highest interest – mentioned by six in 10 respondents among those who expressed interest in career-related information. This was followed by one in two interested in networking opportunities. In addition, over four in 10 respondents expressed interest in information about career fields and areas that are hiring as well as in information about a job search, resume/CV tips, etc. Alumni were less interested in mentoring recent graduates or in having an alumni mentor, each at about one in five respondents.

### Career-related Content of Interest



\* Limited to respondents who indicated that they were interested in career-related information. n=548

In providing more career-related information, universities should focus on employment and networking opportunities, but also provide information about areas that are hiring and tips about aspects of the job search process. Based on the high expressed interest, there is a need among university graduates for this type of information and this can serve as a path to build or deepen their connection to the institution.



## Opportunities:

- Identify opportunities to share more career-related content with graduates, focusing primarily on job postings and networking opportunities.

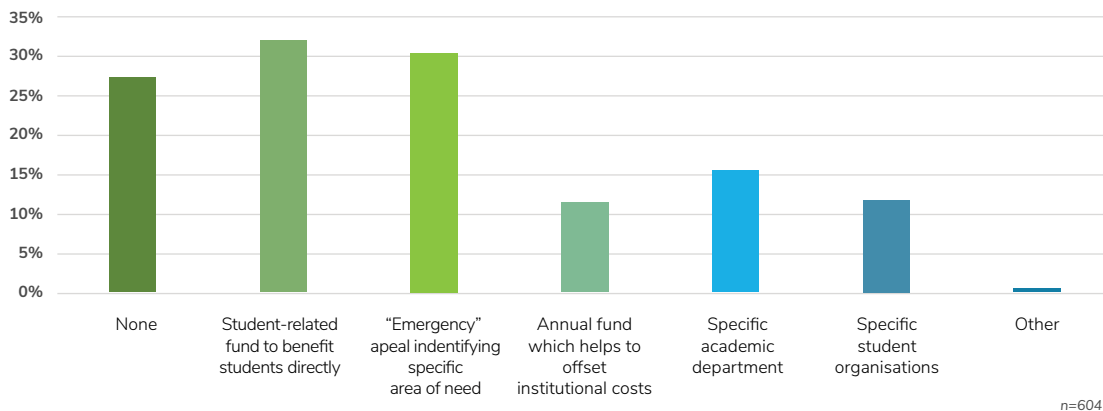
## Supporting the institution financially

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Alumni financial support is becoming increasingly important as an additional source of revenue to support students and the institution, although the alumni participation rate averaged just over 1% in Ireland and the UK<sup>1</sup>. This mirrors the data from the survey, as the large majority of respondents (84%) have not made a gift to their university since graduation. Of those who have made a gift, all but three percent report being irregular donors, meaning that they give every few years (8%) or have made a few donations since graduation (6%). There is likely an opportunity to grow financial support from graduates. While only 16% have made a gift in the past, when asked how likely respondents would be to make a gift in the coming year, 15% responded that they are likely or very likely to do so, with an additional 13% being neither likely nor unlikely. This highlights the opportunity to grow financial support from among alumni.

In addition, as seen in other research on giving trends, respondents were more likely to support the university if solicited by a peer. In that situation, 28% stated that they are either likely or very likely to make a gift, nearly doubling the percentage who are likely to make a gift. Therefore, a key element in increasing support is identifying ways for peers to participate in the solicitation, whether through crowdfunding-type efforts, or peer-to-peer fundraising. Universities should seek to identify somewhat regular annual donors and consider inviting them to help in encouraging their peers to make a gift.

### Area Most Likely to Support



<sup>1</sup>CASE-Ross Report (2021, April 30), <https://www.case.org/resources/philanthropic-giving-uk-and-irish-universities-reached-ps109-billion-2020>.

In addition, universities should consider adjusting the focus of solicitations given the stronger interest in supporting funds that help students directly, including scholarships and emergency grants, as well as “emergency” appeals that identify a specific area of need. Areas that were of lower interest included support of the annual fund, specific academic departments, and supporting specific student organisations. This provides institutions with guidance on how to frame future solicitations to highlight the need for student support and the direct impact of that support on students and their experience at the institution.

### **Opportunities:**

- Continue to build a variety of solicitations to alumni, focusing on student-oriented solicitations.
- Seek to engage alumni to help solicit their peers.

## **Final thoughts**

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The survey results show a clear interest among graduates to continue to engage with their institution. This is the starting point for alumni engagement, and the results also highlight opportunities to adjust engagement strategies with a goal of broadening and deepening relationships with alumni. Given the strong expressed interest among respondents, universities should increase communications and programming opportunities for graduates, focusing on networking opportunities and providing career-related information. Additionally, there are opportunities to review and refine existing strategies from an engagement and solicitation perspective.

Data from this national survey can help to inform new strategies and support existing ones. While the pandemic has changed how institutions engage their graduates and how donors and non-donors alike are solicited, there is a great opportunity to adjust strategies in the near term and consider longer term changes that will impact alumni engagement for years to come.

*Data was collected through a survey conducted in Ireland in January 2022 using a national survey platform. To qualify for the survey, respondents had to indicate that they had earned at least an undergraduate degree. 604 responses were considered valid and used in the analysis. For each data point, null values were excluded.*