

# On the alumni networking of the Postgraduate Programme Renewable Energy at the University of Oldenburg

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## ABSTRACT

Higher education (HE) programs and their home institutions establish alumni networks to keep in contact with their graduates. Objectives to run such networks may stay undefined and rather general. An investigation was carried out to analyze the field of activity and features of the alumni network of the Postgraduate Program Renewable Energy (PPRE) at the University of Oldenburg, Germany. Focus was put to the approaches to run and nurture such a network. Focus was also put on the user behavior. The network was established close to the start of the program in 1987 in form of a closed and supervised emailing list. The PPRE alumni network today is formed by 560 alumni from all batches since the program start. Responses to a survey were returned by 28% of the alumni, naming different interests in the use of the network. Results indicate a positive, self-perpetuating effect on the network development and program recognition based on an extended managing of the network.

## 1. Introduction

At first sight alumni networking seems to be a tangential issue of renewable energy education programs. However, alumni networking enables such programs a view on renewables beyond mere physical and technical issues. Therefore alumni networking contributes to the dissemination of the technology and the alumni feedback loop assures the sustainable development of educational programs.

Principally, alumni networks of HE institutions carry the potential to benefit both, the offering institution and its alumni. A basic feature of alumni networks is to create a community, with which the addressed group of graduates can identify themselves (Bardon et al., 2015).

Alumni networks addressing heterogeneous groups of alumni, like e.g. the [Alumniportal Deutschland](#) (Federal Ministry of Economics and Development, Germany, 2017), present themselves specific in their objectives. Numerous features address potential interests of the single alumnus, e.g. closed discussion groups for a self-identification to one or several sub-communities within the network, seeking to keep international Alumni, graduated in Germany, in contact. Goal is the beneficiary for the single alumnus one the one hand side and accessibility of the alumni for undefined future collaboration options on the other. The acceptance of the network is shown to the user community by e.g. the number of users, lively blogs and subject specific forums.

Another format of such outward networks are networks run by the

institution of higher education themselves. The institution's alumni network is set up to attract its graduates, while the alumni are mostly anonymous to each other. The institution invites all alumni to subscribe to the network, while trying to attract the potential user without offering a personal contact. Objectives to run such a network may stay vague to the operator, users, or interested newcomers. Features typically are a newsletter and options to create own networks based on a hosted online platform. The operation of the networking platform and thus the communication process can be based on a third party business server (University of Oldenburg, 2017).

In contrast, HE program alumni networks are based on a closed community and environment not visible to the public. Such networks are not in need to seek for members, but incorporate coming generations out of itself. The network operator is a known staff member, able to keep personal contact to the single alumni. The alumni network of the *Postgraduate Program Renewable Energy*, PPRE, is of this format.

The authors, being past and present staff members of PPRE, investigated the features and details of the PPRE alumni network. We refer to renewable energy education programs while specifically focusing on PPRE's experience.

The research hypothesis was, that a moderated, multilateral network formed by alumni and the former home institution have the potential to create overarching benefits for all actors and users likewise, reaching out in quality assurance and permanent development of the

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Abbreviations	
AGEP	German Association of Postgraduate Programs with special Relevance to Developing Countries, <a href="http://agep-info.de/">http://agep-info.de/</a>
DAAD	German Academic Exchange Service, <a href="https://www.daad.de/de/">https://www.daad.de/de/</a>
DFN	Deutsches Forschungsnetzwerk, <a href="https://www.dfn.de/">https://www.dfn.de/</a>
EUREC	European Master in Renewable Energy, <a href="http://www.uni-oldenburg.de/en/eurec/">http://www.uni-oldenburg.de/en/eurec/</a>
HE	Higher Education
IRENA	International Renewable Energy Agency
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PPRE	Postgraduate Program Renewable Energy, <a href="http://www.ppre.de">http://www.ppre.de</a>
RE	Renewable Energy
UO	University of Oldenburg, <a href="https://www.uni-oldenburg.de">https://www.uni-oldenburg.de</a>

program itself and its alumni network.

An online survey quantitatively and qualitatively investigated the users' networking behavior. Interviews with staff members of PPRE delivered information from the operator's side. Staff interviews and reflecting processes investigated quantitatively and qualitatively measurable benefits and drawbacks for the program. Findings of the study indicate that the process of alumni networking results in added values beyond factual and social community bands.

## 2. Methodology

The analysis identified and investigated features, activities, and factors specific for the network during the three decades of its existence. The chosen internal evaluation formats were an online-based survey on the user behavior within the emailing list and additional semi-structured interviews with the program operator, administrators and contributors to the program, focusing on activities and human resource demand.

The network incorporates PPRE alumni and the alumni from the European Master in Renewable Energy (EUREC), who have been hosted by PPRE during the first semester studies at University of Oldenburg (UO). Students of the current batches are also included in the network.

The survey was sent to 560 alumni from 83 countries still represented within the emailing list based network since 1987, representing more than 92% of the program's graduates and students from the current batches.

An additional screening and evaluation of the program activities served to identify descriptors for the quality of the program. The screening of past and ongoing activities was retrieved from the PPRE statistics and archive, including information on national and international program activities (Fig. 1). The authors' experience as contributors to current or former quality management of PPRE, international workshop and summer school development, and management within the program, as well as lecturing activities, student and alumni counselling, is included to the evaluation of the results.

Personal communication with alumni working in the university environment and with external senior staff from other HE programs served to compare and weight the retrieved information and contributed to single aspects of the evaluation.

The data base of this research is limited, as to our knowledge no German renewable energy program operates an alumni network as intensive as the PPRE program (Tuschy et al., 2017).

## 3. Results

The start of the network in 1988 was based on the alumni initiative of the first students, wishing to stay in contact beyond the end of their studies. Since then, the PPRE alumni network is founded on a time and human resource intensive managing and maintaining work, based on the emailing list, and rising with the number of graduates. Thereby the program committed itself to a content oriented networking within and for the network (Fig. 2).

The information retrieved by the email based communication feeds the statistics on whereabouts and career development of the alumni

worldwide.

Moreover the qualitative and quantitative data retrieved, represent a permanent information influx to the program development through identification of successful program features.

The management of the network by the operator ensures a smooth and reliable operation of the communication between the program and the alumni on an up-to-date database. Work force from program's side today add up to 2.5 person months per year.

The network is the basis for communication and cooperation of the alumni as well as manifold outward activities, which are organized today by the program, the alumni, and student groups. Such activities started as early as 1993 with the first alumni seminar organized in Nairobi, Kenia, and are reflected in students networking engagement nowadays (Students of the University of Oldenburg, 2015).

### 3.1. PPRE alumni networking activities

The emailing list serves two main networking features: the database and the annual newsletter. PPRE's emailing list is anchored within the DFN (Deutsches Forschungsnetzwerk), offering safe server access and long lasting availability of online communication service, free of costs and independent from business oriented service models. The maintenance of the emailing list by the PPRE operator cares about netiquette, spam control, and annual updating of the member list on request.

A survey was sent to alumni and students of PPRE and EUREC in January 2017 in order to collect quantitative data and content oriented

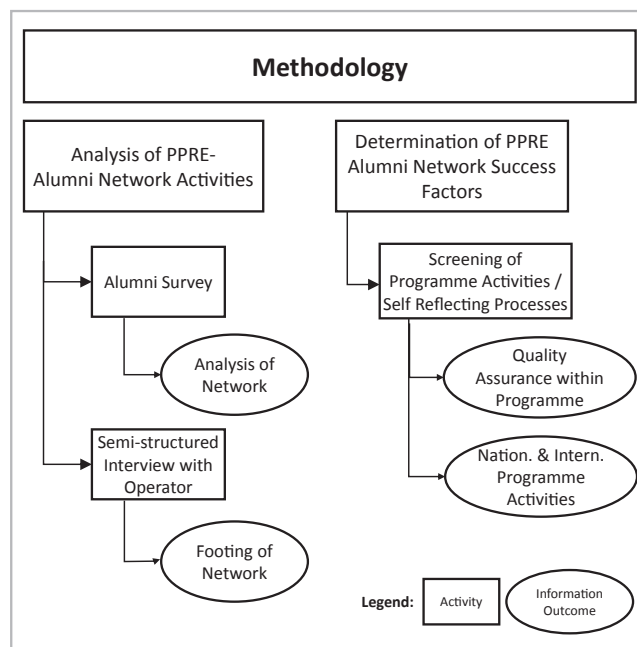


Fig. 1. Methodology analysis of PPRE alumni network features. Source: authors

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