# How to Increase HAMK IB Alumni Engagement?

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Bachelor's thesis

Valkeakoski campus and International Business

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International Business — Abstract

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The research aims to answer the question “How to Increase HAMK IB Alumni Engagement?”. The thesis was commissioned by Häme University of Applied Sciences.

The knowledge base of the thesis includes a theoretical part based on customer relationship management, customer commitment and relationships between companies. Possible communication channels for an alumni network have been introduced.

The research method is qualitative research, because the aim was to get more ideas for the development of alumni activities. The research material was collected through a questionnaire that was targeted at students at Häme University of Applied Sciences' International Business program (BBA). An interview was conducted with the Marketing Coordinator from HAMK’s School of Entrepreneurship and Business. The survey and interview sought to find out what students are interested in and current state of the alumni activity.

Based on the information obtained from the research, it is recommended that the alumni activities of Häme University of Applied Sciences' international business program should be further developed to meet the career development and networking needs of graduates.

Keywords Alumni, alumni activity, network, marketing, customers

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International Business Tiivistelmä

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Aihe How to increase HAMK IB alumni engagement?
Ohjaaja Simona Chilba

Opinnäytetyön tarkoituksena oli selvittää, millainen on alumnitoiminnan tilanne Hämeen ammattikorkeakoulun kansainvälisen liiketoiminnan yksikössä, ja tutkia sen kehittämiskohtia. Opinnäytetyön käsittelee alumnien sitoutumisen lisäämistä oppilaitokseen valmistumisen jälkeen ja millä sitä saataisiin lisättyä. Opinnäytetyön toimeksiantajana oli Hämeen ammattikorkeakoulu.

Opinnäytetyön tietopohja koostuu asiakassuhteen hallinnan, asiakkaan sitoutumiseen ja yritysten välisiin suhteisiin liittyvästä tiedosta. Tietopohjan lisäksi esitellään eri viestintäkanavia, joita voidaan käyttää alumniviestinnässä ja niiden toimintaperiaatteita.

Opinnäytetyö on toiminnallinen. Tutkimusmetodina on laadullinen tutkimus, koska työssä haluttiin saada enemmän ajatuksia alumnitoiminnan kehittämiseen. Tutkimusaineisto kerättiin kyselyllä, joka oli kohdennettu Hämeen ammattikorkeakoulun kansainvälisen liiketalouslinjan opiskelijoille. Haastattelu tehtiin yrittäjyyden ja liiketoimintaosaamisen yksikön markkinointisuunnittelijan kanssa. Kyselyllä ja haastattelulla kerättiin tietoa alumnitoiminnasta, myös opiskelijoiden kiinnostusta alumnitoimintaa kohtaan haluttiin selvittää.

Tutkimuksessa havaittiin, että urakehitykseen sekä työelämään liittyvää alumnitoimintaa toivottiin nykyisien opiskelijoiden keskuudessa. Tutkimuksesta saadun tiedon perusteella suositellaan, että Hämeen ammattikorkeakoulun kansainvälisen liiketalouslinjan alumnitoimintaa tulisi kehittää vielä enemmän valmistuneiden opiskelijoiden urakehitys- ja verkostoitumistarpeita vastaavaksi. Kansainvälisen liiketalouslinjan alumneille tulisi tarjota täysin englanninkielinen alusta verkostoitumiseen.

Avainsanat alumnitoiminta, asiakkuudenhallinta, alumni, verkostoituminen

Sivut 36 sivua ja liitteitä 5 sivua.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Häme University of Applied Sciences´ International Business program wants to improve alumni engagement in the future. Alumni are former students of a facility, and they should be considered as an asset after graduation. With the International Business program being so multicultural, having a working alumni program in the future is very important. In a modern globalized world when for international businesspeople the sky is the limit a proper alumni program would offer many benefits. An alumni network is very valuable for universities to have and keep alive.

This thesis will concentrate on finding ways for Häme University of Applied Sciences´ International Business program to improve alumni engagement. To find out solutions for better alumni engagement, proper research on topic has been made, with the use of surveys and interview, which are valuable sources of information on this topic. Based on the results on the current situation is easy to determine after analysis the recommendations for the future.

## 1.1 Commissioning Company

Häme University of Applied Sciences provided this thesis topic. HAMK is a state-recognized higher education institution with over 8,000 students from around 65 different countries. HAMK offers 27 Bachelor's degree programmes, 10 Master's degree programmes and professional teacher education. (HAMK, 2021). This research is concentrating on the International Business Bachelor of Business Administration program in the HAMK unit located in Valkeakoski. The International Business program in Valkeakoski provides a full set of skills for professional careers especially in the European and Chinese markets. Students have an opportunity to do half or full year exchange during their studies also completing work-placement abroad is an option. (HAMK, 2021.). The Commissioning company wants to improve their alumni engagement in the hope of more valuable networking and possibilities for upcoming students. HAMK VISION 2030 was published together with HAMK 2030 Strategy. HAMK VISION 2030 (Table 1.) shows strategy for future. Active and extensive alumni network is mentioned in both first crossroads in the picture. It shows that HAMK

wants to develop their alumni network in early phase of HAMK VISION 2030 to support the strategy.

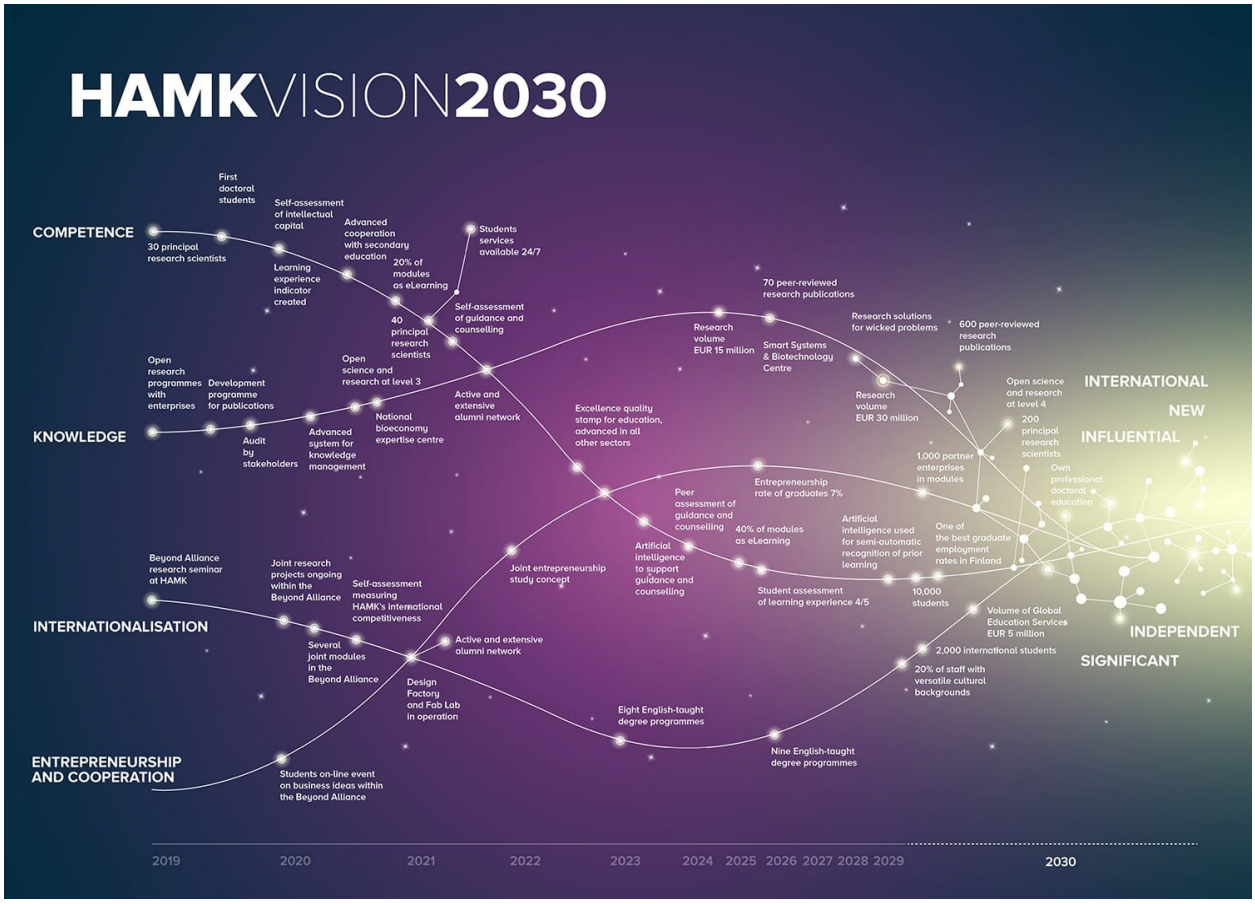


Table 1. HAMK vision 2030 (HAMK, n.d.)

### 1.1.1 Research question and Objectives

The research question for this thesis topic is “How can the International Business program at HAMK increase their alumni engagement?”. HAMK IB program being so international the emphasis of this thesis should be kept on the international point of view as the whole alumni program must be suited for all the students’ not just Finnish students.

The aims of the thesis are explained in this section through the objectives. The objective of the research is to help HAMK International Business boost alumni engagement in the future. Theory of Customer Relationship Management is valuable with regards to treatment of customers. Communication channels which can be used are made familiar with the reader. In this research, the alumni are treated like a customer. Based on the results of the survey

and the interview recommendations, new ideas for alumni engagement have risen after analysis.

Studying theory is related to customer relationship management (CRM), customer commitment and Business to Business hereinafter referred to as B2B. While understanding these topics, it is possible to give feedback and advice based on the results of the surveys and interview. Customer relationship management provides tools on how to treat current students in order to maintain tight bond even after graduation. This thesis values CRM knowledge because the relationship between staff and students is a very important asset to have. As every university receives money when a student graduates, it is important to identify if such incentive is influencing the current situation at HAMK University of Applied Sciences.

Conducting a survey within the students' community of HAMK IB will concentrate more on the future and what needs to be done to raise the engagement of the alumni. Researching answers to many questions helps to find out what has been done until now to spark alumni engagement, which will then help with the arising of new ideas. There must be a benefit when action is taken in the direction of alumni engagement. Determining desired benefits gives an idea of what needs to happen and where it needs to happen for everything to go as planned. The benefits on a general level from alumni engagement are business relations and through that internship places and thesis topics.

## 1.2 Introduction of alumni

Alumni is the plural of the nouns alumna and alumnus originally coming from the Latin language and meaning former students. (Oxford dictionary, n.d.) Alumna means a graduated female student and alumnus means a graduated male student, whereas a group of the graduated students, from either one or both genders, is usually referred as alumni. (Business dictionary, n.d.)

Alumni programs are created for graduating students to be kept up to date with the current universities´ activities, for engaging and inspiring to network with former colleagues that can further help to achieve a more successful business life. An alumni network should be created

to encompass a database of all the graduates from one university. Both parties benefit from an alumni program, as it gives a good reputation to university, and at the same time offering possibility to even work with old friends in a same company. Alumni programs are more common in the United Kingdom and the United States. Compared to them, Finland it is still in very early phase. A big difference between Finland and for example United States can be noticed in the way the Finnish government is paying Universities from every single graduate, while in US going to university is in majority of cases funded by student or parents (Neering, 2018).

Alumni constitutes a former customer of university. A university wants to have a good customer base and therefore we can state that the alumni communication methods are quite similar to customer communication ones. In the 21st century, digital communication is the best way to approach this matter. Nowadays it is easy to bring large groups of people on the social media platforms offered. It is the most effective way and should not be underestimated.

### 1.2.1 Alumni activities

Alumni events serve as a bridge between the student and professional worlds. The activities aim to get the graduates involved in the previous university's operations. Members of the alumni community receive up-to-date information on education, research, initiatives, and publications. Activities can be organized by university or alums can take care of it by themselves. Class reunions are good example of typical activity, and it is easy to organize. Students from the same year class get to together and connect with each other once again after a long time. Attending alumni activities offer chance for networking, life-long learning and having quality time with people with same mindset. (Karelia, n.d.)

### 1.2.2 Alumni benefits

Being member of an alumni network can offer benefits. Alumni associations provide networking possibilities, which can assist persons seeking new career choices by connecting recent graduates with established professionals. Alumni associations may provide virtual

networking events with job interview tips or host online career fairs. Many alumni networks have LinkedIn groups or use member databases to connect alumni. (Carlton, 2021)

Discounts with other businesses for alumni members are usually available. Discounts can relate to different kind of things, such as museum tickets, food, gym memberships and many more. Different universities have their own discount benefits. University of Helsinki offers to Helsinki Alumni community members reduced price (15-20% off the normal price) on training card to UniSport (University of Helsinki, n.d.).

### 1.2.3 Alumni in Finland

As stated, before alumni programs were relatively non-existent in Finland especially when comparing to US paragons. Some universities on the other hand offer quite active alumni programs and have proper alumni programs running. Especially in international study environment it would offer a lot more perspective for new students if former students would be kept more involved. It would offer more networking to students and motivate them to have better careers after graduation.

## 1.3 HAMK Alumni activity and services

Graduates can register as an alumnus in HAMK student web page. Keeping in contact with former students is important and it has benefits for both parties. A newsletter is sent two to five times a year to all registered alumni. Newsletters have information about upcoming events, further education and about all the HAMK related issues worth to let be known. The library and information services are available for registered alumni. (HAMK, 2021.)

### 1.3.1 HAMK Alumni event

HAMK Alumni event is a yearly tradition of a get together ceremony that lasts a day. It concentrates on networking and discussing about interesting topics. In the 2019 alumni event, for the first time, an alumnus of the year was selected. Also, in 2019 an event possibility to take part in Nordic Business Forum was offered by HAMK. (HAMK, 2019.)

### 1.3.2 BitFest

BitFest is event organized by Häme University of Applied Sciences Business IT degree programme in Hämeenlinna University Centre. Focus of the BitFest seminar is digitality and it is targeted to HAMK's students, local businesses and everyone interested about event. Participating event is free, and it is organized in English. (HAMK, n.d.)

Esports is popular among students in HAMK and in 2020 launch of a HAMK Gaming Academy was one part of BitFest seminar (BitFest, n.d.).

### 1.3.3 HAMK Talents

HAMK Talents is a service offered by Tiitus. Tiitus is a website where students and companies meet. HAMK Talents is very valuable for people graduating to find a job related to their studies. Alumni can register as an employee or employer. Companies can offer work placements and thesis topics for HAMK students. It is free of charge for users in both parties. Students can start to create professional profile already during studying. After graduation this service is still available. Registered users can update info about their competence and skills. Through HAMK Talents companies will directly contact experts they choose to. (HAMK, 2021; Tiitus n.d.)

### 1.3.4 GO STRONG!

The GO STRONG! project's main aim is to increase the possibilities of the international students of HAMK Valkeakoski campus to get employed in Finland. GO STRONG! project organized a two-day Career Day event at HAMK's Valkeakoski Campus in 2020. Local companies were invited to the event, and this offered networking chances to students. Some of foreign alumni from International Business program were on hand to share their job experiences and offer advice on how to obtain work, particularly in Finland. The workshop's graduates come from the following business fields: sales, start-ups and entrepreneurship, logistics, and marketing. (HAMK, n.d.)

### 1.3.5 Class reunion

HAMK also offers possibility to arrange class reunions. HAMK offers its facilities in many of campuses for use if needed. (HAMK, 2021.)

### 1.3.6 Library and information services

Library is available for registered alumni. Library card is one benefit, and it gives access to huge base information of in all 7 campus libraries. In 2020 libraries in all campuses offered over 80 000 books and even more e-books to borrow. (HAMK, 2021.)

# 2 Theoretical Framework

Theory part includes information concentrated on customer relationship management, customer commitment and business to business relations. Possible communication channels for alumni networks are introduced with main principles.

## 2.1 What is Customer Relationship management?

Customer Relationship Management is about delivering increased Economic Value Add (EVA) revenue and profit. CRM gives answers to many questions as who customers are, how customer interacts with businesses now and in the future. Current and future value of the customer can be determined. This makes it possible to make an overall business strategy for organization and to determine which customers provide best results. Services and products are easier to determine with the help of CRM and of the communication channels, which are most effective ways of marketing in company. (Alexander & Turner, 2001, p. 1)

## 2.2 Drivers for Customer Relationship Management

CRM provides a framework and great understanding for a business to deal with internal and external pressure. Drivers concentrate on the main issues affecting relationships with

customers. In the fast-changing competitive landscape companies must be awake and response to changes must be fast. Social media sets new challenges to the image of the company, which can be de-valued suddenly and it must be taken care of early. Social media is widely available and almost everyone has access to it. Technology is evolving and it has potential to make or break someone. It needs to be evaluated and it gives advantages for organizations to acquire tangible benefits. (Alexander & Turner, 2001, p. 2)

### 2.2.1 Competitive landscape, change, conflicts of interest

Competition is big threat, and it needs to be tackled effectively. Companies must be more innovative and offer better value for customers to outstand from competitors. Also, business function should be re-evaluated and changed to match better and effective ones. Change is constant and one must be flexible in the modern business life to survive. Rapidly responding to changes is important and realizing return on investment will not be so easy to achieve as it was 10 years ago because of greater competition and innovative style of business life. Nowadays products and services share together short lifetime and developing new product and services should be taken care.

Traditional model concentrates heavily on fixed and current assets and what company has now. This does not work well because of fast phase of business life. Concentration should be moved to the future and think about existing customers and how to keep them satisfied. Company needs future value and profitability of existing customers. New customers should match the profile of good customers to be expected to have long-term relationships with the company. Alumni can be considered a customer. There are always expectations and needs for alumni. How universities fulfil those, it has huge impact for the future of relationship management. Fulfilling alumni needs generates value and it benefits organization in the long run. (Alexander & Turner, 2001, p. 2)

### 2.2.2 Customer expectations

Customers demand an integrated multi-channel service and more control. Customers want easy access to get in touch with the company. Also access from anywhere for an example possibility to watch a seminar of a company on the other side of the globe. Experience for

customer needs to be effective because not anyone has loads of time to talk and chat about upcoming things. Also, competition is high and there is always someone else offering something else interesting for customers. Loyalty does not only come from satisfaction to services offered there needs to be something else to spark the engagement and differentiate from others. (Alexander & Turner, 2001, p. 5)

### 2.2.3 Customer knowledge

Customer should be considered as an expert and never looked down by front line staff. Understanding who are companies' customers can help increase the success of an organization. Customer needs, behavior, likings, and spending habits are all valuable information. With the help of customer knowledge, it is possible to align business operations, product line and services to build relationship with customers. (Alexander & Turner, 2001, p. 6)

### 2.2.4 Customer of the future

In the future customer will be different. CRM concentrates on this and really shows what customers were and how they will be in the future. Flexibility of working environment is important now and should not only concentrate on a local region. Virtual organizations are also very common and realizing that they are also actual businesses without fancy stores must be understood. (Alexander & Turner, 2001, p. 7)

### 2.2.5 Key points to have in mind

Future value of customers is the most critical factor when assessing value of company. One must take care of existing customers not only the new ones. Marketing models need to be picked up carefully. Customers are not equal and taking that into account is crucial point. If company thinks that their customers are all the same, they are totally on the wrong path. Persons in the company must understand why student in this case is valuable to them and really have them engaging to future actions not just current. Every company should have developed processes to support best customers and deliver value to them. This means best

customers should be handled in much planned way and how to establish long lasting relationships. (Alexander & Turner, 2001, p. 12)

## 2.3 Framework for CRM

Full scope of business contributions and customers need to be clear to create a successful Customer Relationship Management Strategy. It includes Customer expectations, calculating future value of customers, technology, marketing and many more. (Alexander & Turner, 2001, p. 14)

### 2.3.1 Customers' expectations

Customers are the most important thing to take care off to create a working system. There are key areas of customers' needs and fulfilling them creates the most ideal relationship for a customer. Every customer has own individual requirements. Company should never expect customer to have time for them. Thereby flexibility is the key word to achieve bond with customer. On the company side customer should be put on the podium and all the needed actions required to create relationship with them should be done by their schedule. When having a limited amount of time wanted information should be brought out to customer in the clear way. Talking about irrelevant things just scares customer away. Recognition for the customer about where they are, and their achievements should be increased. (Alexander & Turner, 2001, p. 15)

### 2.3.2 Future customer value

Customers' wants and needs are important to take care of and it can add costs to company. In the long run it will pay off with more satisfied customers. It needs to be calculated if it is possible to afford it and what is the best and most cost-effective way to deliver customer a value. Differentiating companies' customers is important and finding the jewels is crucial thing. Investing money and time to ones who are considered best customers makes profit in the long run. Finding the best customers ensures company to have a bright future ahead and company will not end up investing money to bad ones. Customer lifetime value is the base for CRM strategy. Working strategy shows who is the target audience to be served and how

to take care of customers. The return of investment from actions taken towards customer value are focused on determining customers that are not worth spending resources on but using those resources on more valuable customers. (Alexander & Turner, 2001, p. 16)

### 2.3.3 Visions, objectives & strategy

Every business should have a vision, set objectives and strategies. Clear understanding over customers and their needs determines those. To implement CRM strategies company must have leadership. Leadership is all about vision, motivation, bringing out will for change and growth in value for long-term goals. It needs be clear which customer group company is focusing on and how they create value in those groups. Product and services deliver the value and it need to be researched which of those grow the value and profitability of customers. Customer objectives must be met with a CRM strategy. (Alexander & Turner, 2001, p. 17)

### 2.3.4 Strengthening customer bonds

In the modern society people interact through many different communication channels like web, mobile phones, social media, e-mail, TV. In CRM planning these factors must be considered. Marketing strategy needs to cover all these channels, so company can be communicating with all the right people. For example, mobile phone might be good in communicating in one country but when customer is living abroad other methods should be used like e-mail. Internet connection is everywhere and contacting people living abroad through e-mail is way more effective than by traditional mobile phone calls. Best possible way would be multi-channel response options.

Taking care of customer bonds should not be on one man's shoulders. Customers always consider company as a one unit. That is why all the company personnel need to thrive towards strengthening the bonds with these customers. If this does not happen it might cause some valuable customers to flee if they do not find a person to like and create a bond with. All the areas should work properly for the customer and if all the actions are flawless it will leave a good taste behind. (Alexander & Turner, 2001, p. 22)

## 2.4 Business to Business CRM definition

“An organization trades goods or services with another organization over an extended period, either on an ad hoc or on-going basis. The supplier may represent a key component in the customer's supply chain or support services for the delivery of the customer's own business with its clients” (Alexander & Turner, 2001, p. 26).

### 2.4.1 B2B CRM

Sharing knowledge and networking is very important in B2B CRM. Good relationship with businesses is source to success in the very hectic business life. Good bond between companies will create understanding of markets, competitors, and customers. Focusing on key business opportunities is very important. With proper business to business relationship reducing transaction costs is possible. Providing the right information to the right people at the right time makes the experience more personal and eases the whole operation for both parties involved. (Alexander & Turner, 2001, p. 27).

### 2.4.2 Stereotypical B2B CRM content

Market information and segments where organization operates are determined. Organization profile is important, as it offers information about company culture, rules, strengths, weaknesses, and ways of measuring it. Contact information is usually put aside and just printing business cards without thought is very common. Keeping up the customer database is important to cut the waste and replacing non valuable customers with new quality ones. (Alexander & Turner, 2001, p. 27).

## 2.5 Business to consumer CRM

In the general B2C is simpler than B2B Customer Relationship Management. It is easier to gather information about customers because consumer markets are much larger, and some companies can have millions of customers. Customer buying process is fast and more dynamic than business to business processes. Revenue from customer is less and it generates less profit per sale. This makes distinguishing profitable and unprofitable

customer more difficult, when differences are so small. Some organizations do not have direct customer relationship, it has more to do with the brand, and it poses more b2b type of challenges. The most difficult challenge in a competitive market is serving the right customers with the right products and support services at the right time. (Alexander & Turner, 2001, p. 26).

## 2.6 Marketing in CRM Program

Main goal of CRM marketing is to improve customer relationships. It creates customer loyalty, revenue, and customer lifetime value. Nowadays companies have plenty of different kind of software to use. CRM Software offer customer analysis, recommendations and many more. Features can be shaped to the needs of a different companies. Using these tools will determine the best actions to take in marketing. (Alexander & Turner, 2001, p. 47)

### 2.6.1 Example of CRM marketing

Almost everyone has some sort of loyalty card. It is great example of CRM marketing. Loyalty card can offer customer discounts, special birthday offers, loyalty reward and even e-receipt. All the data is saved from customer and marketing team can direct their marketing more efficiently. When using loyalty card, it is possible to track customers who have not made purchases recently and offer them limited time special discount. (Milano, 2021)

### 2.6.2 Customer promoter

Customer feedback is required to determine customer wants and needs. Key questions should be addressed in feedback. Organizations want to know if customers value their product or services. Usually easy to, use is a key point to success in having proper instructions of how to use and provide value for customer. Having easy to use product or service is not always enough if competitors offer the same.

### 2.6.3 Effective communications

CRM has an impact on the entire business, including customers, suppliers, and investors. It causes significant organizational change, and people can easily become uneasy or feel excluded from the process.

Marketing must provide a channel for communication across all groups, based on the following guiding principles:

- Communicate frequently in small chunks.
- Make the message relevant to each audience.
- Establish a mechanism for open feedback.
- Speak what you mean and mean what you say.
- Be open and succinct in your communication.
- Demonstrate benefits to each audience type throughout the program

(Alexander & Turner, 2001, p. 49)

### 2.6.4 Customer knowledge

Executing successful marketing in the CRM program need knowledge of the customers. Gathering customer knowledge can be done through questionnaires both online and offline, maintaining mutual relationships with the customer also paying attention to customers and their interactions. To gather this knowledge company needs a strategy for consistent collection of customer data. Understanding who your customers are is very important.

(Alexander & Turner, 2001, p.54-55)

### 2.6.5 Customer segmentations

Role of the marketing team is very important when customer segments are defined for the company. Customers have varying levels of value and worth to a company. When company has determined valuable customer segments, they can target marketing to these specific segments.

(Alexander & Turner, 2001, p.56)

## 2.7 Direct marketing

Direct marketing means direct communication with customer through mail, email, social media, and texting campaigns. When using direct marketing, advertising media such as television commercials are not used. Direct marketing effectiveness is easier to assess than mass media marketing effectiveness. Call to action is important in direct marketing. A call to action can be a social media post with a link to buy a specific product. When a customer responds to a call to action and clicks on a link, the method has been successful. (Investopedia, 2020).

### 2.7.1 Direct marketing VS CRM

In big organizations this might get confusing how to differentiate from each other. Direct marketing and CRM are the most common ones to confuse. Below are listed features of these two marketing methods.

**Direct Marketing**

- Marketing activity based on customer knowledge built from customer data.
- Direct marketing campaigns aimed at acquiring, retaining, and growing customers, as well as cross-selling to them.
- Easy to measure

**Customer Relationship Management**

- Business-wide commitment not just marketing, cross-functional
- Business organized around customers not products
- Single view of customer across all touch points, technology challenge
- Multi-channel delivery of goods, information process
- Relevant dialogue across all touch points, communication

(Alexander & Turner, 2001, p. 50)

## 2.8 Alumni engagement

Maintaining an active alumni network can be difficult, but alumni networks can use technology to build a strong student-institution relationship that spans the student lifecycle and extends after graduation (Chase, 2021). Relationships with students and alumni are backbone for the universities. Sparking the alumni engagement and having strong relationship must be cherished already before graduation. Trying to connect with alumni after graduation is not beneficial for either student or university. For university to earn proud alumni, progress starts from the very beginning of the student lifecycle already in the recruitment phase. Best practice to alumni engagement is relationship building. Concentrating on lifelong partnerships with graduates, universities will have a multiple ways and opportunities to advance their programs. (Chase, 2021)

### 2.8.1 Alumni engagement strategy

Working alumni engagement strategy brings out benefits for organization such as career guidance and opportunities to the current students. It should also create a network of past students globally and help current students with their study plans and career development.

Strategy can be designed to meet the needs of the alumni. Universities must understand the differences in the needs of their alumni. Recent graduates are most likely after career related activities and news. Graduates from the past can have established career and they can give back to their universities. (Patel, 2021)

## 2.9 Communication channels

The possibilities are endless in today's digital age. It offers a wide range of different channels to choose from. Social media is ubiquitous, and many people use it daily. Organizations must determine which channels are most appropriate for each purpose. The following chapter will introduce various social media channels that can be used for communication. This shows the differences between these platforms. Traditional communication channels such as Email and phone calls are introduced briefly.

### 2.9.1 LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a social networking site owned by Microsoft that was founded in 2002. It is a professional networking site where people can share their career achievements and skills. Finding jobs is an important part of the process, and employers can look for suitable candidates for their companies. It is referred to as the world's largest professional network on the internet. It is simple to use from a desktop or mobile device. (Business Insider, 2019)

Sharing own experience, skills, and education to promote yourself for career advancement is a key feature. LinkedIn's basic concept is the same as Facebook's: join groups and share stories, pictures, and videos. Groups are very important for networking, and universities could use them to stay in touch with graduates. LinkedIn is free to use, and with a free membership, users can make professional profile visible to others. They also provide paid premium membership, which unlocks additional features such as marketing, company recruitment, and learning products. (LinkedIn, n.d.)

### 2.9.2 Twitter

Twitter is a social network that was founded in 2006 and is now one of the most popular platforms available. Over the last ten years, the platform has grown steadily from 50 million users to over 350 million users today. Main purpose for Twitter is to share posts with big audience. It is very effective platform to share posts as everyone can see them and reshare them forward. It is easy to reach large number of people within very little time. (Backlinko, 2021)

How Twitter stands out from other platforms is that by posting on their platform user have limited number of characters per posts. Current limit is 280 characters, and this makes Twitter different. Posts are short and easy for people to read fast and react to. Engaging with other people is very fun and easy and this is biggest competitive advantage for Twitter. Twitter has an unlimited potential, and many organizations are still yet to discover its possibilities. Promoting company or new products is easy for new audiences since not everyone uses Facebook. Universities with active twitter usage can create relationships with graduate and other universities. Twitter can be considered a bit more informal and little humour in posts should not be avoided because it can spark a good conversation. (Twitter, n.d.)

### 2.9.3 Facebook

Facebook is a social networking site with over 2.8 billion users and 1.84 billion daily users. Mark Zuckerberg founded it in 2004 and it has since grown to become the largest social media platform in the world. On Facebook, users can create free profiles and connect with friends, colleagues, and other people they do not even know yet. Sharing photos, videos and your thoughts is basic principles of its usage. (Webwise, n.d.) Facebook also owns companies like Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook messenger which all are very popular social media platform.

Facebook is totally different from, for example Twitter. People send and receive friend request to get in contact with wanted individuals. It can be considered as more private option and user can set their profile privacy to their own liking from open to very private.

Facebook has also groups for different interest and for example schools can have their own alumni or year class groups to stay in contact. Groups can be set to be public or private for which use it is meant. If group is private only members can see the posts and it allows for easy planning of events for example.

Facebook offers tools for universities to share their news, achievements, and milestones. Sharing achievements of students and professors and milestones of universities is good to start with. (Lua, n.d.). It is important to be active and topics shared in Facebook to be interesting and frequent to really engage followers.

### 2.9.4 Instagram

Instagram is social media platform owned by Facebook and it concentrates on sharing pictures and videos. It is free to use and has over 1 billion users. It is very simple to use and whole idea of Instagram is being visual platform. Facebook and twitter are more about people writing their thoughts in the feed. (Instagram, n.d.)

It seems like everyone is on Instagram nowadays, from small businesses to big ones, news organizations to cultural institutions, celebrities, photographers, and musicians, and not to mention the cottage industry of influencers that have come in its wake (Antonelli, 2020).

### 2.9.5 YouTube

“Every day, millions of people come to YouTube to be informed, inspired, or just plain delighted” (YouTube, n.d.). Channels can be subscribed so users can access their liked videos fast and easily. Every video has a comment section where people engage conversations. HAMK has a YouTube page, and they are actively sharing content there. Universities can have video presentations about their degrees and this way it is possible to reach further students. (HAMK YouTube channel, 2021)

### 2.9.6 WhatsApp

WhatsApp is the free to use messaging application. WhatsApp joined Facebook in 2014, but it will continue to operate as a stand-alone application providing a fast and reliable communications service around the world. Over 2 billion people in over 180 countries use WhatsApp. WhatsApp offers secure and reliable messaging and calling. WhatsApp was created to have an alternative to SMS text messages. Application now supports sending and receiving text, photos, documents, videos, and location, also voice calls. (WhatsApp, n.d.)

## 2.10 Traditional communication channels

Traditional communication channels are Email, phone calls and text messages. Even though social media is everywhere some still rely on traditional ways. Word email comes from electronic mail, and it is widely used feature of the Internet (Techterms, 2014). Advantage of the email are free and fast delivery when comparing to traditional mail. Emails can be delivered globally, and delivery is instant. It is possible to attach file such as image or Word document. Great benefit of using Email is long-term storage and possibility to access them even many years after. (Speedcheck, n.d.)

# 3 Methodology

This chapter introduces data collection methods. A questionnaire within International Business students and questions with staff member working in HAMK will be analysed. A questionnaire was aimed for current international business student in HAMK. A qualitative method is used in this research. A questionnaire was sent to HAMK IB students, and it included various questions about the future expectations of alumni activity. The interview consists of 6 questions for Sanna Viljakainen a Marketing Coordinator at the HAMK's School of Entrepreneurship and Business which includes the International Business degree programme, and this helps to introduce current HAMK IB alumni activity situation.

## 3.1 Questionnaire for current HAMK IB Students

Survey for current International Business students was posted 14th of September in HAMK Yammer for International Business group. Research permit was obtained from Häme University of Applied sciences to conduct this research. Questionnaire was named HAMK International Business Alumni Activity Questionnaire and conducted with Microsoft Forms. A total of ten responses was gathered from questionnaire within two weeks. Due to the low number of responses, the qualitative method was chosen because it gave more insight of what students want. First part of the questionnaire concentrates on background information and overall interest of alumni activities. First questions were chosen to understand general satisfaction of the students towards HAMK. Questionnaire gave answers on social media platform and communication channel preferences of the students. Last questions in the survey concentrated on what the future graduates expected from alumni network.

## 3.2 Interview with Sanna Viljakainen

Viljakainen was interviewed via e-mail with six open questions about current situation with HAMK International Business alumni activity and whole HAMK Alumni network operations. Viljakainen was familiar with the alumni activity within HAMK and especially in International Business program. The questions focused on the current number of alumni from International Business, the situation of a targeted activity for International Business alumni and how current students are inspired to participate an alumni activity. Also, the overview of cooperation with members of HAMK alumni network was one part in the interview. Alumni activities are usually free of charge and question about possible fees was also part of the interview.

# 4 Results

This chapter shows results from questionnaire, explanations of questions are listed for each part and results of the interview are discussed.

## 4.1 Background questions

1. Gender

| | |
|---|---|
| Female | 2 |
| Male | 7 |
| Prefer not to say | 1 |

Table 2. Gender of respondents

2. Age

| | |
|---|---|
| 17-20 | 1 |
| 21-24 | 1 |
| 25-29 | 3 |
| 30-34 | 5 |
| 35 or more | 0 |

Table 3. Age distribution

Background questions 1. and 2. asked about the gender and age of the respondent. Ten students answered the survey. Seven of the respondents were men, 2 were women and one preferred not to questions. Majority of the participants were 25-34 years old. This could mean the older male students are more interested in the alumni activity.

## 4.2 HAMK related questions

3. Would you recommend HAMK IB to other people?

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes | 7 |
| No | 1 |
| Maybe | 2 |

Table 4. Likeliness of recommending HAMK IB to other people.

4. Are you interested in joining HAMK's alumni network after graduation?

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes | 3 |
| No | 1 |
| Maybe | 6 |

Table 5. Interest in alumni network

Third question was enquiring if the students would recommend HAMK IB to the other people. Seven students responded yes, one answered no, and two answers were maybe. Fourth questions asked the interest of the students in joining an alumni network after graduation. This question raised some uncertainty and 6 out of 10 answers were maybe. Three of the students answered yes and one no answer was collected. Respondents seemed to be satisfied with the HAMK in general, but the alumni network part showed that the students might not be familiar with the alumni activities.

### 4.3 Social media and communication channels

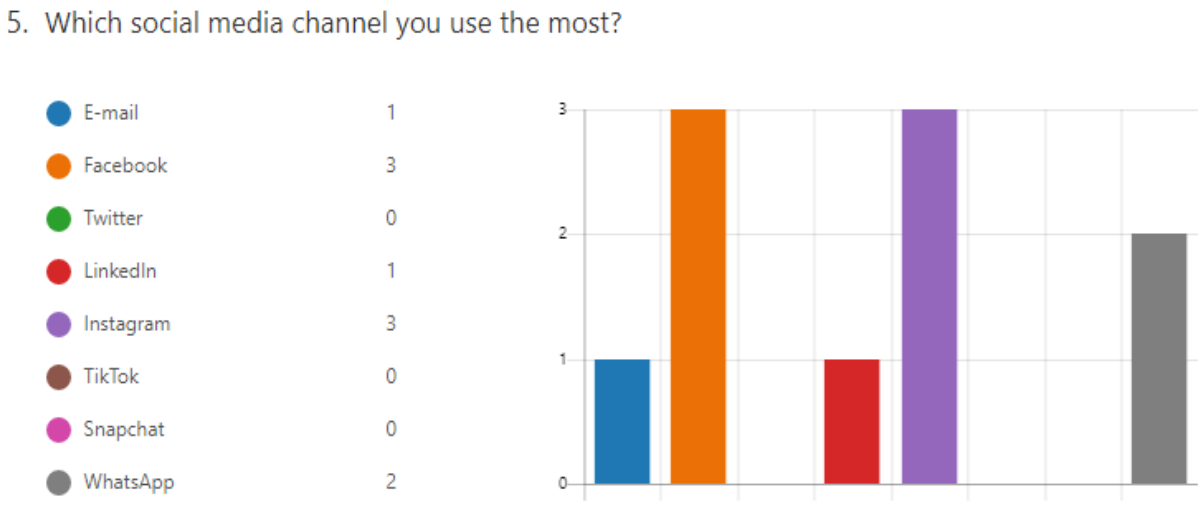


Table 6. Most used communication channels

The most used social media channel was the fifth question. Understanding which platform is used by students wanted to be researched. Popular social media channels were listed in the questionnaire, such as e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and WhatsApp. This question brought up more variation in answers. Facebook and Instagram were the most used channels with 3 answers to both. WhatsApp was favoured by two students and E-mail and LinkedIn both had only 1 person using it the most. Twitter, TikTok and Snapchat did not receive any answers.


Table 7. Preferable alumni network communication channel

Sixth question asked the preferred channel for receiving alumni news. Email was the most popular option in this question. Five of the respondents chose Email. Social media was second most answered option. Traditional mail and messaging app bot got one answer.

### 4.4 Alumni activity related questions

7. Would you be interested in receiving alumni news?

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes | 3 |
| No | 0 |
| Maybe | 7 |

Table 8. Overall interest in receiving alumni news

Seventh question in the questionnaire asked about the interest of receiving alumni news. Question got 3 persons answering yes, 7 answering maybe. The problem with the question could be that respondents most likely have not seen any alumni news.

8. What type of news you would be interested in?

| | |
|---|---|
| Work-related | 5 |
| Events | 4 |
| Alumni success stories | 1 |
| Alumni of the year | 0 |

Table 9. Type of news wanted

The type of the news alumni would be interested in received was the eight question. Question had 4 options work-related, events, alumni success stories and alumni of the year.

Work-related news received the most responses (5 persons) also events were the second one on the list. Alumni success stories was interesting for one respondent and the alumni of the year did not raise any interest. Respondents are really interested in work-related news and events where networking can happen.

9. Which of the following alumni services would you be interested in?

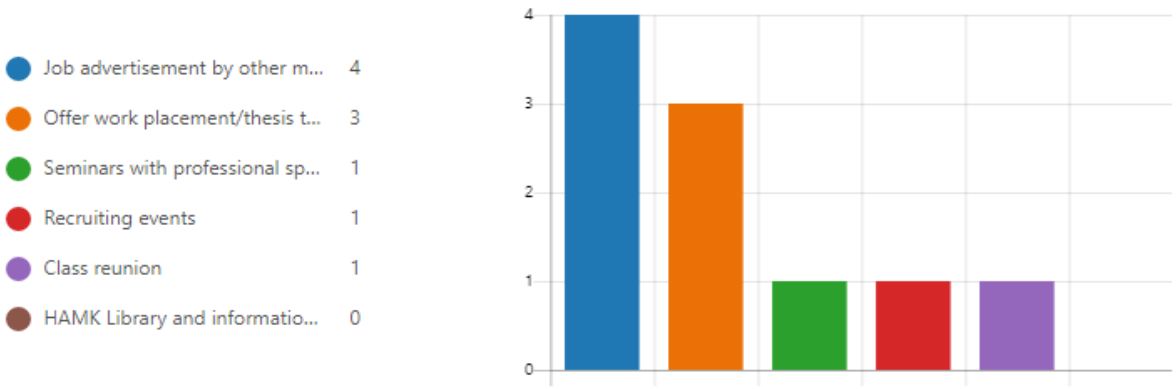


Table 10. Alumni services

Alumni services were ninth question. Job advertisement by other members of alumni network raised the most interest (4 persons). Offering work-placement and thesis topics to current students second most chosen option (3 persons). Seminars with professional speaker, recruiting events and class reunions all got one answers each. Library and IT-services did not raise any interest.

## 4.5 Career expectations and development supported by alumni network

10. Are you interested in working in Finland in the future?


Table 11. Interest of working in Finland

Question number ten asked about interest of working in Finland in the future. Eight respondents were interested in and 2 answered maybe. This means that interest for working in Finland is high withing respondents.

11. Do you think that joining HAMK International Business alumni network would support your career development?

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes | 3 |
| No | 0 |
| Maybe | 7 |

Table 12. Career benefits joining alumni network

Eleventh question wanted to clear if students think that an alumni network would support their career development. Three people answered yes and seven of the respondents were unsure.

12. What kind of help you expect to receive from alumni network?

4 Vastaukset

| Tunnus ↑ | Nimi | Vastaukset |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | anonymous | Networking |
| 2 | anonymous | International opportunities worldwide |
| 3 | anonymous | I would expect help and answers on my questions related to working in Finland. |
| 4 | anonymous | Connections to work related |

Table 13. Open question about what kind of help students wanted.

Last part of the questionnaire was the open question. This question was focused on what kind of help the alumni network was expected to offer. Open question helps to understand

what the respondents really want. Respondents mentioned networking in and outside of Finland. Alumni network also was expected to help when considering working in Finland. Career opportunities abroad were also of importance.

## 4.6 Interview discussion

Further, a discussion based on answers from interview about current situation of HAMK International Business program and alumni activity was conducted.

There are currently 68 International Business alumni in the Finnish-language register. The English-language register it was under reform when conducting this interview, so no information was received from it. Having the register under reform is great thing and it will support alumni activity especially with graduates from International Business program. HAMK BBA/MBA alumni LinkedIn group had 326 members on 26 September 2021. LinkedIn group communication is bilingual.

There are little targeted activities to International Business graduates. International Business alumni have been involved in events organized by International Business program such as Career Week and Career Day. International Business alumni have had an official meeting in Saint-Petersburg in November 2019. In 2019, a joint HAMK alumni event was held in conjunction with the live streaming of the Nordic Business Forum.

When students graduate, they are asked about possible interest of joining HAMK alumni register and information about interested students are sent to HAMK strategic communication team. Joining alumni register is free and benefits are listed in HAMK website.

Typical cooperation with alumni is visits in class and career events. In career events career paths and tips for work life are given to students. The alumni can act as a guest lecturer. Alumni and companies, work in offering projects and thesis topics to students. This opens possibilities to complete work-placements in those companies. Cooperation possibilities are posted via LinkedIn groups and personal contacts.

# 5 Conclusion

This research aimed to understand how the International Business program at HAMK can increase the alumni engagement. Based on a qualitative questionnaire of alumni activity sent to current HAMK International business students it showed that students are interested in alumni activities and networking. It can be concluded that there is some unawareness in general level within students about HAMK's alumni activity and what is offered. HAMK's after graduation website where is the invitation link to register as HAMK alumni could provide more information about the benefits.

Methodology was effective to answer the research question of thesis. This research clearly illustrates that career related activity was hoped within students, and it would raise the interest of joining alumni network. Research also raises the question of how to make HAMK alumni activities better known for International Business students.

Based on these results, Häme University of Applied Sciences' International Business program should develop their alumni activities even further to match their graduates career development and networking needs. Most students wanted to be contacted with email, because of this having the alumni register up to date with correct email addresses is very valuable. HAMK Talents is a great service for graduates and inspiring people to join should be emphasised already during studies. Career stories from HAMK International Business graduates would raise interest and motivation.

Research showed that Facebook and Instagram were more popular social media platforms than, for example LinkedIn. Facebook alumni group could be created to see if there is more interest on other platform. LinkedIn alumni group is already established, and it has 326 members. Researcher felt that number of members is relatively small, and the group is bilingual which can scare away English-speaking graduates. HAMK International Business program should consider creating their own LinkedIn or Facebook alumni group and language of the group should be English. International Business alumni group would offer better chances for its graduates to network. Researcher felt that being in a bilingual group for English-speaking member the interest of following the group might be distracted because of content not available in the preferred language, in this case English.

HAMK vision 2030 (Table 1.) shows the aim for active and extensive alumni network to be running already during 2021. Results of this research can be used to reach the alumni network goal set in HAMK 2030 strategy.

HAMK has been working on reforming their English-language register and this is good step towards engaging with graduates from International Business. Having data from all the students makes it possible to have international alumni activity. Writer of the thesis thinks that many students apply for the International Business program because of it being multicultural. One could argue that most graduates would expect the alumni activities to be more multicultural as the whole International Business program is.

Having up to date register would make it possible to organize alumni event also abroad. This would require planning if bigger alumni event would take place. The most important aspect here, however, would be that graduates all around the world would have a chance to meet each other's and network.

During the time of covid-19 it has been shown that there are many platforms that can be used to organize events online. Organizing small get togethers or career presentations for graduates could be one way to engage alumni activity. Gatherings could be more of an informal meeting, for example on Microsoft Teams platform and, it should concentrate more on talking about working life and business-related topics. Career presentation idea could be implemented in the way that volunteer graduates would have presentations regarding their paths. These types of career presentations should take place couple of times a year because forcing something to happen too often usually just cause people to lose interest. Research showed that career and working-life related activities aroused the most interest. These presentations would give graduates ideas of how to develop themselves and where an HAMK International Business alumni can make a career.

The future studies of this topic could address implementing more effective career support strategy to be available for International Business graduates. Researching which combination of the social media platforms and communication channels would be most demanded and practical to use.  Possible connection with the active alumni network and interest of working in Finland could be one topic too.

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**Appendix 1: Interview with Sanna Viljakainen**

1. How many alumni are there on the HAMK IB line at the moment?

2. Are there any targeted activities for alumni graduating from the HAMK IB line alone?

3. How are current students encouraged to join alumni?

4. What benefits are offered to alumni?

5. Is the alumni activity free or does it involve any fees?

6. What kind of cooperation is done with alumni?

1.Kuinka monta alumnia on HAMK IB linjalta tällä hetkellä?

2.Onko pelkästään HAMK IB linjalta valmistuneille alumneille mitään kohdennettua toimintaa?

3.Kuinka nykyisiä opiskelijoita innostetaan alumnitoimintaa liittymiseen?

4. Mitä etuja alumneille tarjotaan?

5. Onko alumni toiminta ilmaista vai liittyykö siihen mahdollisesti maksuja?

6. Minkälaista yhteistyötä tehdään alumnien kanssa?

**Appendix 2: Questionnaire for current International Business students**

# HAMK International Business Alumni Activity Questionnaire

1. Gender

- ◯ Female
- ◯ Male
- ◯ Prefer not to say

2. Age

- ◯ 17-20
- ◯ 21-24
- ◯ 25-29
- ◯ 30-34
- ◯ 35 or more

3. Would you recommend HAMK IB to other people?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Maybe

10/6/2021

## Future HAMK IB alumni

4. Are you interested in joining HAMK's alumni network after graduation?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Maybe

5. Which social media channel you use the most?

- ◯ E-mail
- ◯ Facebook
- ◯ Twitter
- ◯ LinkedIn
- ◯ Instagram
- ◯ TikTok
- ◯ Snapchat
- ◯ WhatsApp

6. Through which channels would you like alumni news to be sent to you?

- ◯ Email
- ◯ Mail
- ◯ Phone
- ◯ Social Media
- ◯ Messaging app(WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger etc.)

7. Would you be interested in receiving alumni news?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Maybe

8. What type of news you would be interested in?

- ◯ Work-related
- ◯ Events
- ◯ Alumni success stories
- ◯ Alumni of the year

9. Which of the following alumni services would you be interested in?

- ◯ Job advertisement by other members of alumni
- ◯ Offer work placement/thesis topic for HAMK IB students
- ◯ Seminars with professional speakers
- ◯ Recruiting events
- ◯ Class reunion
- ◯ HAMK Library and information service

10. Are you interested in working in Finland in the future?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Maybe

10/6/2021

11. Do you think that joining HAMK International Business alumni network would support your career development?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Maybe

12. What kind of help you expect to receive from alumni network?