Constructing identities of alumni relations professionals in Central and Eastern European (CEE) higher education

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DECLARATION

I, Serhii Sych, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, this has been indicated as appropriate.

Signature:

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways alumni relations (AR) specialists in Central and Eastern European (CEE) higher education institutions construct their professional identities, and factors affecting the construction of these identities. These issues are investigated through the prism of literatures on “alumni relations,” “professionalism” and “identity,” viewing the construction of identity as a reflexive process between individuals and the structures in which they operate. A qualitative analysis has been undertaken with thirteen institutions, comprising in-depth semi-structured interviews with 16 purposefully recruited alumni relations specialists, from eight Central and Eastern European countries. The data gathered throughout this research has been synthesised to explore and map the complex process of constructing professional identity. Given the limitations of this small-scale study and its interpretivist epistemological positioning, a framework has been developed to gain a more nuanced understanding of the topic. Accordingly, three emerging themes have informed the exploration of the AR professional identity construction: how *professional identity is manifested;* the role of the *career trajectory,* and *institutional context* factors. Consequently, some characteristics of a pronounced AR professional identity and factors affecting it, are suggested. The latter include composite institutional structure variables (e.g. *peripheral, secondary, support* or *core* AR institutional positioning) and type of career trajectory profile (e.g. *specialist, experimenter, and resident*). A number of areas associated with inhibiting or facilitating professional identity construction and the development of roles in response to changing contexts have been identified, including a “strained” AR professional identity, the role of institutional leadership and a lack of AR professional

development opportunities. Possible future directions for research and implications for practice are discussed, including the role of professional development and key influencers, such as institutional leadership and practitioners with a strong AR professional identity, in fostering AR professional projects, and mitigating factors that inhibit this process.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to thank my mother for her passionate encouragement, as well as my amazing wife, Anna, and my boys Serge and Alexander, for allowing me to take the time and energy needed to accomplish my educational goals.

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Extra thanks go to my employer, Central European University (and in particular all the colleagues in Enrollment, Careers and Alumni teams) for allowing me to undertake this work, and to Dr Liviu Matei for his trust and encouragement.

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Ultimately, I appreciate the time and knowledge shared by alumni relations practitioners who participated in this research and made this thesis possible.

REFLECTIONS ON MY PROFESSIONAL AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

This thesis is very important for me, both as a research project and one of the key elements of my study programme. Taking the opportunity to look back over six years of my EdD (International) part-time study, I would like to reflect on my professional and academic development, and the ways in which my academic programme elements informed my work and learning.

The first thing that strikes me when I reflect on the length of the programme is that six years is a very long time! If someone had told me that within this period the following things would happen, I would not have believed them. Within this time my son was diagnosed with a rare autoimmune disease; my parents-in-law passed away; my home country of Ukraine became the victim of military aggression and the town where I had grown up was bombed and de facto annexed; and at the same time, I have been promoted at work and my professional portfolio has been expanded; I started to serve on boards of two major international associations; have received a prestigious European award for best practice, and eventually submitted my doctoral thesis. Perhaps, it appears counterintuitive, but my studies and work have not only demanded attention at the expense of other parts of my life, but also counterbalance the sense of a “collapsing world,” surprisingly helping me to stay sane by providing me with a mix of other “meanings” full of discovery and, sometimes, frustration, which I think I managed to control better than my family members’ health or regional geopolitics.

When I decided to apply for the EdD programme, I had both personal and professional reasons. I had an ambition to widen my knowledge base, be better qualified for a senior university management position, and possibly, teaching opportunities. I thought my promotion was on the horizon and my role as an occasional professional development trainer required some curriculum concept development skills, as well as professional self-reflection. I was successful in my alumni relations and career services work at Central European University (CEU); a Budapest based graduate school, with a focus on social sciences and humanities; and was able to build a positive reputation internally as an alumni relations professional, and externally as a speaker and trainer. Although I was respected and felt listened to, it appeared that for some reason many of my administrative peers across my professional networks were not offered the level of support and attention I was able to enjoy. It later became clearer that the difference could be the extent to which I was engaging with and utilising both my practical experience and professional knowledge base, openly sharing my ideas and being willing to accept and consider the critique of these ideas. I admit that working in alumni relations, which at the time was a rather unfamiliar concept for many of my colleagues, encouraged me to be creative in introducing new ways of thinking within my immediate professional context and the wider university community.

A combination of the above factors had encouraged me on many occasions to step out of my daily work responsibilities and reflect on my professional area and career path from a variety of angles. Extraordinarily, this coincided with very strong encouragement from my supervisor, who provided full support for my on-going professional development and growth. While such a long-term commitment to part-

time study required considerable deliberation, I felt it was an opportunity to grow professionally, advance academically, and, at the same time, make a long-term commitment to an outstanding employer. On a more personal note, I am the first in my family to receive a university education. I have had both a personal ambition and passionate encouragement from my family, especially my mum, to study for a terminal degree.

Going back to my study experience, the EdD programme was made up of a number of components and designed to support doctoral level study and research for educational practitioners residing both in the UK and abroad. It differed from a PhD by linking the taught components, primary research and professional practice. As a full-time practitioner enrolled in a part-time programme, my strategy was to stay focused and consistent in my written assignments, as well as integrate my newly acquired knowledge and professional interests. The content and structure of the taught courses, as well as the written assignments and feedback from the faculty were very helpful for me as a learner and connected well my professional and academic roles.

I believe that the focus of the first taught module “Foundations of Professionalism” (FoP) and its assignment were well structured for a practitioner like myself. When applying to the EdD programme, my initial research proposal was based on organisational theory, but it lacked a deep understanding of how my interest in alumni relations would transform into researchable project. The FoP module set up a useful framework that allowed me to feel more competent as a researcher, while reflecting on my professional practice. In my FoP paper, I focused on the evolution

of alumni relations professionals in my geographic context. In setting the stage for a detailed analysis of alumni relations as a profession and trying to answer the question “Who am I as a professional?” the paper provided a brief historical overview of the profession's development. Encouraged by positive feedback from internal markers, I submitted the revised version of the paper for publication. The article was published in the Handbook on Internationalisation of European Higher Education (Sych, 2012a). In retrospect, I should say that I was utilising a wide range of literatures, without relying on a solid theoretical framework. From today’s perspective, that paper appears eclectic and, in some parts, journalistic in style. Having said that, it was a way for me to reflect on my professional practice and, at the same time, to learn more about the topic.

Building upon my FoP, for the Methods of Enquiry 1 (MoE1) paper I kept my main research focus on the alumni relations professional area. The paper provided a general overview of the development of this area of practice and made a case for the need for this type of enquiry, based on the uniqueness of the case, regional needs and a significant knowledge gap about alumni relations. The study was to explore the main characteristics of the professional roles and identities of alumni relations professionals in the context of a small, research-intensive international graduate school in Central Europe. The research proposed epistemological, theoretical and methodological frameworks to study the alumni relations professional identity. While generally more cohesive than the FoP, this paper still drew on a wide range of literature and was trying to utilise simultaneously a variety of conceptual frameworks and methods of enquiry. Indeed, one of the critical remarks from an internal marker had to do with my attempt to blend case study and action-research.

Thus, in my MoE2 paper, which was a logical continuation of the MoE1, I focused on a case study. I took into account another piece of MoE1 feedback on hypothesis testing in a case study. While, not completely abandoning my ideas on the important identity characteristics of alumni relations staff, I made them more tuned into the process of researcher awareness and data analysis, rather than hypothesis testing per se.

The last taught module Methods of Enquiry 2 (MoE2) was a continuation of MoE1. MoE2 helped me to crystallise knowledge and skills necessary to conduct independent research and prepared me for my first small-scale original study, reported in the MoE2 written assignment. The research paper focused on constructing professional identities of alumni relations specialists in relation to their institutional space and external stakeholders' relationships. The research was based on a small-scale case study of three individuals. I sought to utilise a theoretical framework that could capture the qualitative and interpretative nature of my research questions. I offered a detailed account of the types and sources of knowledge needed to answer my research questions. The MoE2 paper also dealt with research design and research methods, ethical issues, data analysis and interpretation. The initial MoE2 feedback was useful in helping to re-focus the literature review, improve the cross-referencing of data interpretation and research design, as well as in strengthening the working definitions of professional identity and related concepts. I should also note another piece of well-placed feedback about one of my MoE2 paper reflections in which I was making conclusions, based more on the literature cited than on research evidence. I had to learn how to keep a delicate balance between personal hypothesis, secondary source, literature and original research

evidence, and what combination of all these could qualify as an adequate argument to support a particular conclusion.

Guidance provided by my supervisors helped me to successfully submit MoE1, MoE2 and Institutional Focused Study (IFS). The latter was a small empirical study focused on alumni relations specialists at my university, CEU. The research drew on the individual interviews of five alumni relations professionals as the main method of data collection, while document research and focus groups served as additional methods. The studies of professional identity were used to interpret the empirical data, and to enhance our understanding of this under-researched group of professionals. The analysis dealt with professional identity characteristics for alumni relations staff. The IFS became an important pilot project, which helped me to prepare for my thesis, both in terms of finalising my topic and research methods. Overall, I made an effort to utilise the knowledge acquired during the course of the study and some preliminary research results from written assignments in my work on the doctoral thesis, as well as in my capacity of trainer, conference presenter and unit manager. I have shared some preliminary insights into professional identity issues with colleagues at my institution, conceivably helping new staff members and adding value to staff recruitment, professional evaluation and assessment procedures.

Producing the doctoral thesis has become a natural continuation of my written assignments and, at the same time, a very personal experience. I have been exploring how alumni relations practitioners construct their professional identity while attempting to shape my own. The latter has evolved as a blended research-

practitioner identity, conceivably allowing me to position myself as both a higher education professional and a researcher. On a more personal level, I was surprised that despite my busy work and the life challenges described above, I truly enjoyed academic inquiry, including analysing and interpreting data. Perhaps for the first time in my adult life I felt the spirit and joy of discovery. It felt that the EdD study programme, including the courses, readings, discussions with my fellow students and written assignments, were meaningful and conceivably reached their goals.

Over the past six years of working towards this doctorate, I have developed a greater understanding of academic research as well as of my own profession. I have been able to combine the academic and the professional in a way which offers an opportunity to improve my own practice and support and encourage the on-going development of the alumni relations professional area in Central Europe and beyond. Moreover, the years of study have influenced my approach to work and life, for instance, by making me more aware of how important data, critical enquiry, focus and discipline are in making decisions and achieving goals. Learning how to balance several spheres of my life requires concentration, discipline and determination to achieve my life goals. This has been hard, but I hope it has made me stronger as a professional and intellectual. Also, it has opened a new world of research and academia to me, which could potentially diversify my future career opportunities. On a more general note, I believe that with more research and public debate on issues of higher education administration, professional administrators, in general, and alumni relations officers, in particular, will gain more visibility and self-confidence to champion and promote our work as a meaningful and rewarding career that contributes to higher education and social progress.

Chapter 1 – INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.1 Context

The dynamically changing landscape of an increasingly interconnected world with its latest wave of military conflicts, refugees, immigration, job and financial market disruptions, reshapes national agendas, and challenges international institutions and regional alliances. On the one hand, few would doubt that as “universities have survived wars and dictatorships,” they will survive this new wave of crises as well (Hillman, 2016). On the other hand, in a world that is uncertain, non-linear, unpredictable, context-dependent and dangerous, higher education institutions globally are facing profound challenges (Elkana and Klöpper, 2016). The list of these challenges is long, but some key problems of contemporary higher education can be grouped around some main issues, including: university mission, teaching and learning, research, knowledge transfer, digital technology and social responsibility (Altbach et al., 2009; Altbach and Peterson, 1999; Cole, 2016; Elkana and Klöpper, 2016). These issues have to be tackled within an environment of commercialization, change and uncertainty (Barnett, 2000; Bauman, 2013; Bok, 2003; Hassan, 2003), which demand concerted efforts from universities to stay relevant and sustainable by effectively managing their resources and engaging key stakeholders, including students and alumni networks.

While universities are increasingly becoming assessed in terms of efficiency, competition and attractiveness, students and graduates ever more expect to be treated as “customers.” Whether one sees increased marketization and change to

funding structures as a chance to respond through entrepreneurially-led organisational transformation (Clark, 1998) or, conversely, as painful necessities or even as distorting the aims and ideals of higher education (Bok, 2003; Molesworth et al., 2010), the role of higher education administrators and managers is becoming "more pivotal as the sector becomes more competitive, more business and market focussed, and more international" (Lauwerys et al., 2009, p. 5). This requires from universities an increasingly nuanced understandings of a complex set of issues, including student and alumni expectations, external partnerships, stakeholder relations and marketing. The development of these areas within the university context requires professional staff performing a variety of roles, with connecting institutions and external constituencies among them.

In this context, the importance of Alumni Relations (AR) in supporting educational institutions and their graduates in times of "constrained resources, public scrutiny, global competition, and digital communities" has been acknowledged (Lippincott, 2011). A well planned deployment and utilisation of alumni engagement can enhance institutional positioning and assist in the realisation of its strategic objectives in a cost and time-effective manner. In addition to the alumni's important fundraising role, which helps diversify institutional income, graduates can help in many other ways: they may act as institutional ambassadors, enhance institutional reputation and brand, recruit prospective students and mentor current ones, assist graduates with career advancement and provide feedback to the institutions (Arboleda, 2013; Conroy and Rincon, 2012; Dobson, 2015; West, 2016).

Nevertheless, very little attention has been dedicated to the AR specialists who are at the epicentre of this fast developing professional area. Indeed, “one of the most important assets” that help universities to compete for funding, students, faculty and other resources is a “proactive, productive and supportive alumni relations effort” (Davies, 2010, p. xi), led by “capable alumni relations professionals who have the ability to continue managing outstanding alumni programs even in the most difficult circumstances” (Feudo, 2010, p. xiv). Indeed, AR programme management requires handling a variety of tasks, including alumni communications, networks development, maintaining the alumni database, managing volunteers, organising events and fundraising. The complexity of these tasks in the wider context of the challenges listed, demands from AR specialists an increasingly refined understanding of their positioning within and beyond the boundaries of their institutions. This, in turn, relies on professional staff actively interpreting their roles and reflecting on their professional identity. Studying this process provides a stronger basis for the career and professional development of AR specialists, especially as career success is often associated with effective professional identity construction (Arthur et al, 1999; Hall et al, 2002). This study also helps better understand this under-researched group of specialists, by presenting a clearer picture of the space they occupy within institutions, and by providing a more nuanced grasp of their individual career trajectories, values, motives and experiences, considered to be part of professional identity (Ibarra, 1999; Schein, 1978).

1.2 Regional Focus

My immediate geographic context, the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region has undergone post-communist transition since 1989 and has experienced radical socio-political changes (Dobbins, 2011; Schmidt and Knopp, 2013). These changes, coupled with recent global geopolitical challenges, have shown the CEE region to be particularly vulnerable in the maturity test of its political institutions and socio-economic environment on both sides of the EU border (this study includes six EU member-states and two non-EU countries).

Interestingly, despite a shared communist past of Soviet domination and common patterns of development, the CEE higher education systems are not homogeneous. Central and Eastern Europe offers a diversity of higher education systems - ranging from specialised higher education institutions, clustered around non-education ministries, to “commercial” systems based on the private sector. Each of these systems would develop a range of institutional types - from traditional to specialised universities, industrial “monotechnics” or entrepreneurial private institutions. These would often be associated with various organisational cultures, including “scientific,” “public,” “applied” or “market” (Dobbins, 2011; Dobbins and Knill, 2009; Kogan et al., 2008; Scott, 2002). However, despite the diversity a regional perspective is considered appropriate for the purposes of this comparative study, especially in light of comparable experience and timing of various higher education reform attempts in the CEE countries (Matei, 2015; Scott, 2002). One such reform of particular relevance for this study is related to the emergence and fast growth of the private higher education sector. After several decades of their existence, the region’s private

sector's financial sustainability and legitimacy are shifting to a more robust state. Addressing legitimacy concerns and creating stronger institutions have made the CEE private sector more accepted by public and authorities (Levy, 2007; Noelke et al., 2012), positively affecting student enrolment and alumni satisfaction.

Acknowledging the CEE region's heterogeneity and different speeds of education reforms within the EU and the wider membership of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), Central and Eastern European higher education is viewed within the context of European and global higher education trends (Curaj et al., 2012). Indeed, decreasing funding, a growing need for additional resources and more fee-paying students are just some of the challenges that many CEE universities are facing today. Within this context, programmes that can help build mutually beneficial relationships between alumni and universities greatly contribute to institutional sustainability. While lacking the extensive AR professional knowledge base and experience of their North American or UK counterparts (see Chapter 2), higher education institutions in the CEE area are becoming more aware of the role of alumni and of the need to establish or improve alumni programmes (Sych, 2012b). At the same time, many CEE countries often have unrealistic expectations for universities to start, for instance, revenue generation or tracking alumni employment data ("Law CXXXIX on Higher Education. Government Decree 79/2006. (IV.5.) on the Execution of Some Stipulations of Law CXXXIX on Higher Education," 2006), without providing adequate mechanisms for these long-term activities, as well as professional training for AR staff. The dual burden of unrealistic expectations and not very supportive public opinion puts additional pressure on AR specialists, who often become the first university employees to have to deal with these complex issues. In

order to better understand this under-researched group of professionals and how they are coping with these types of pressures, pertinent to CEE higher education institutions and beyond, this study will focus on the ways in which their professional identities are being constructed.

1.3 Study Objectives and Research Questions

Rapidly developing and expanding within and beyond the CEE region, alumni relations has not yet received sufficient academic attention as an evolving professional area. To the best of my knowledge, the current study is the first research project in Central and Eastern Europe dedicated to the topic of alumni relations programmes, in general, and the professional identities of AR specialists, in particular. Its objectives are to explore the professional identity patterns among AR staff, as the need for trained AR specialists continues to grow. Indeed, professional identity involves acquiring “the knowledge and skills” to perform particular job tasks, but more importantly it encompasses “the attitudes, values, norms, language, and perspectives necessary to interpret experiences, interact with others, prioritize activities, and determine appropriate behaviour” (Perna and Hudgins, 1996, p. 5). Accordingly, the focus of this research is on how AR staff enter the professional field, reflect on their experiences and integrate these experiences into their professional identity. More specifically, my main research question is:

In what ways do alumni relations specialists working in Central and Eastern European higher education construct their professional identities?

My sub-question is:

What factors affect the construction of these identities?

1.4 Limitations

As with all research, there are limitations on what one study can achieve. One of the limitations of this study has to do with the size and scope of the project, involving 16 research participants. All suggestions and conclusions made in this research are derived on the basis of this number of interviews, but they provide some indicators of identity construction that could be extended and may be relevant for further studies. While in Section 3.2.4 I give a detailed explanation of the way interviewees were selected, it might be useful at this stage to note another limitation related to the geographic scope of this study and the way eight countries of the CEE region are represented in the sample. While my home-base country Hungary accounts for 50% of research participants, the other 50% of respondents come from the seven other countries of the CEE region. Although drawn from a diverse international pool for the basis of comparison, this study is necessarily limited by the number of research participants and universities per host country.

Throughout the thesis, an effort is made to summarise and express some key arguments and data by using diagrams and figures. Working with a limited sample of respondents, my choice was often to use both raw numbers and percentages. The statistics did not aim at giving this study findings unwarranted quantitative and representative weight, but rather at clarifying proportions and visualise the data.

Importantly, I acknowledge the dominant position of AR-relevant literature in English, and therefore, the Anglo-Saxon tradition of alumni relations, which is due to the practically non-existent AR literature originating from continental Europe in general, and the CEE countries, in particular.

Finally, neither the field of alumni relations, nor the higher education sector is unique in terms of the issues discussed in this study. Indeed, contextual challenges and pressures at both institutional and national levels are applicable to other professional areas and sectors of society. Although some tensions, experiences and patterns reported in this thesis are likely to be found in other areas as well, for instance in the health service sector, or within the fundraising or public relations fields, alumni relations in higher education has been chosen as the focus of this thesis.

1.5 Definition of Terms

To assist the reader and operationalize key terms that are used throughout this study, the list of definitions is provided below.

As per its classic definition, **alumna/alumnus** (feminine/masculine noun, singular) is a graduate or former student of a college or university. Some institutions restrict the term to graduates only, while others widen the definition to include all former students (even those who failed to finish), retired staff and/or other associates (“Fundraising Fundamentals,” 2013).

Educational advancement is an umbrella term for a broad professional field which deals with the integrated management of long-term relationships with an educational institution's key constituents, in order to increase their support and assist the institution to fulfil its mission. The term **advancement** encompasses alumni relations, communications, development (fundraising), marketing and related areas ("Fundraising Fundamentals," 2013).

Alumni relations' primary role as a professional area is to serve host institutions and alumni by championing the institution's mission and fostering alumni involvement with their institutions through building long-term relationships with alumni ("Principles of Practice for Alumni Relations Professionals at Educational Institutions," 2014). A distinction is often made between programmes designed to involve alumni in activities that do not always involve philanthropic financial support and development (a synonym for fundraising). In this respect, "efforts to keep alumni engaged have often been perceived as a docile adjunct that, in some small way, contributed to the main act of fundraising" (Miller, 2013, p. 6).

For the purposes of this study, **alumni relations staff, officer, practitioner, specialist** and **professional** are the terms used interchangeably to describe individuals who deal with any aspect of the relationship with the alumni constituency on a full or part-time contractual basis.

Defined for the purposes of this study as one's professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences (Ibarra, 1999; Schein, 1978), **professional identity** is discussed in detail in this thesis (Section 2.3). Related to

this, themes and textual pointers (statements) which reflect on the research participants' professional commitments, principles, interests, future goals and aspirations (Beijaard et al., 2004; Canrinus et al., 2012) in regards to alumni relations, helped to examine and grasp a **pronounced AR professional identity**. Accordingly, five professional identity characteristics are pinpointed and linked to a robust alumni relations professional identity construct. These characteristics are not meant to serve as a fine-tuned scale instrument "designed to measure professional identity" (Woo, 2013, p. 1), but rather to help reflect on data emerging from this study and inform the identification and categorisation of factors affecting the construction of the respondents' professional identities. Accordingly, the words "strong" and "robust" are used interchangeably as synonyms to a "pronounced" AR professional identity, meaning explicit, observable, and distinct.

Professional development, generally defined as the process of acquiring professional competence, expertise and skills ("English Oxford Living Dictionary," 2016) is used here as a term referring to a broad concept of learning aimed at earning and/or maintaining professional credentials. While at the moment of completing this thesis, no formal AR degree programme appears to be available, the term can be applied to a wide variety of specialised training, formal education, conferences, workshops and informal learning opportunities situated in practice.

The term **classical** or **traditional university** is used here to describe an institution with a university status according to relevant national laws, possibly having several colleges or other academic units, doing research and delivering academic courses at undergraduate and graduate levels ("Carnegie Classifications | Basic Classification,"

2015). Unlike their traditional peers, some higher education institutions in Central and Eastern Europe, which could be called schools, colleges or universities, would not cover the whole spectrum of degree levels and/or would specialise only in some academic or professional disciplines, for example Business School, Liberal Arts College, Medical University or University of Applied Science.

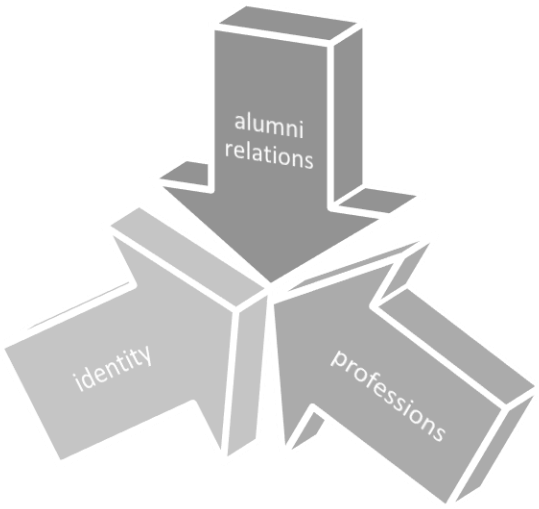
1.6 Thesis Structure

To answer the research questions dealing with ways AR specialists in CEE higher education construct their professional identities and factors affecting the construction of these identities, we need to utilise a theoretical framework that can capture their qualitative and interpretative nature. Some general aspects and the latest challenges for higher education globally and particular issues pertinent for the CEE region are discussed in the introductory Chapter 1. Further literature on alumni relations, studies of professionalism and the concept of identity are considered to be the most appropriate in the context of this research and discussed in the Literature Review (Chapter 2). The latter, together with the Research Design and Methodology (Chapter 3) offer a detailed account of types and sources of knowledge required to answer the research questions. The final two chapters, Findings (Chapter 4) and Synthesis and Conclusion (Chapter 5), analyse the data collected and offer some in-depth discussion of the findings. These two chapters provide answers to the research questions, highlighting the relevance and possible implications of this research for the alumni relations professional area within and beyond the CEE region.

Chapter 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

The primary research focus of this research is alumni relations specialists' professional identity construction within Central and Eastern European higher education and the factors that contribute to the construction of these identities. While the broader higher education context and challenges for universities in the CEE region were briefly discussed in Chapter 1, this literature review gives the theoretical context relevant for this study, discussing a conceptual framework based on the literatures on "alumni relations," "professionalism" and "identity" (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Literature perspectives



2.1 On Alumni Relations

The extensive academic discussion on the alumni relations programmes and the role of AR professionals in higher education is relatively recent and the available literature about this topic is scarce. The relevant literature falls into six broad interconnected categories:

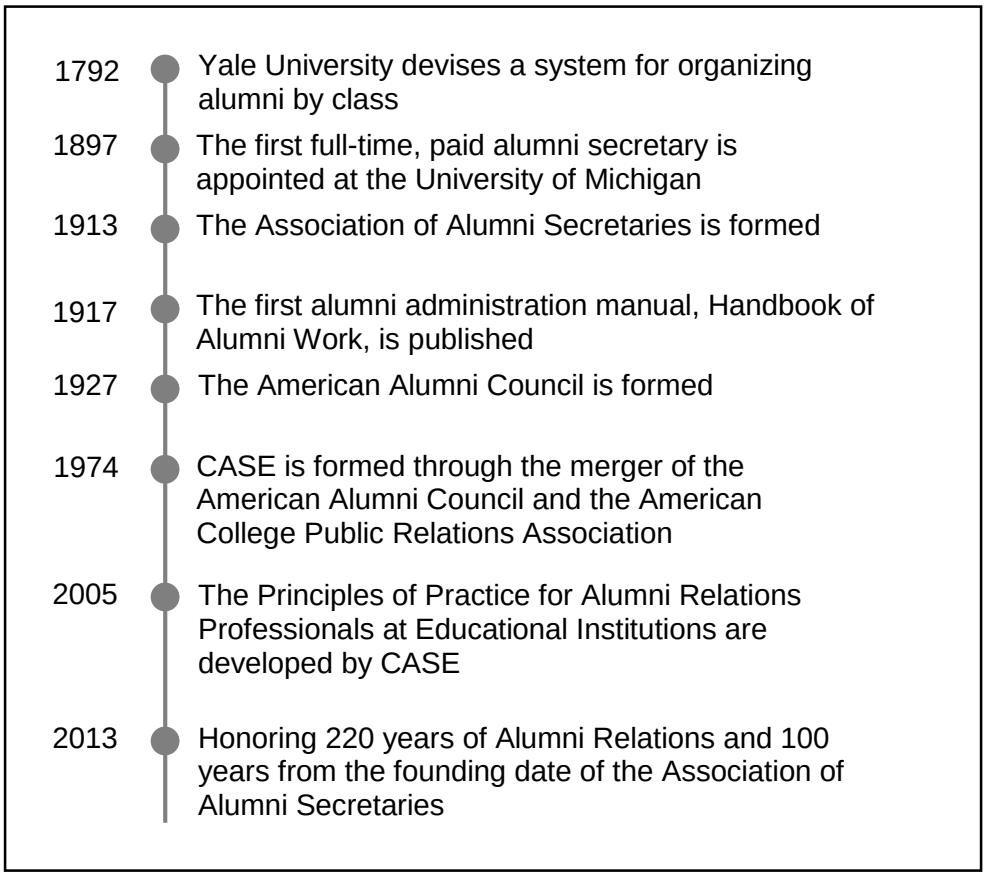
- studies of alumni giving patterns and alumni donor motivation (T. R. Cohen, 2006; Monks, 2003);
- alumni affiliation and volunteer engagement (Ashforth and Mael, 1992; Weerts et al., 2009);
- alumni networks, associations and clubs (Cohen and Malloy, 2010; Feudo and Clifford, 2002; Newman and Petrosko, 2011);
- evaluations of outcome assessments, alumni satisfaction and graduates' careers (Delaney, 2004; Stutler and Calvario, 1996; Teichler, 2007) ;
- history of alumni relations and advancement programmes in higher education (Carter, 1988; More and Smith, 2000; Muscatelli and Mackay, 2011; Pulley, 2014; Sailor, 1930);
- alumni relations strategies, programme structures and career paths of advancement professionals (Cohen, 2016a; Dobson, 2015; Feudo, 2010; Forman, 1989; Nichols, 2011; Ransdel, 1986; Scully, 2010; Shoemake, 2003; Taylor and Onion, 1998).

The first four of the six categories are mostly well researched, and are generally based within established theoretical frameworks. They include motivational and behavioural theories, econometrics, organisational theory, social psychology and sociology. In contrast, the last two clusters of the literature mainly consist of best practices, programme development guides and articles by and for higher education practitioners. The following sections will mostly focus on these two relevant, categories of the literature on alumni relations.

2.1.1 Historical perspective on alumni relations

While examples of alumni volunteer and philanthropic activities associated with colleges and universities date as far back as the sixteenth century (Muscatelli and Mackay, 2011), many start the early history of alumni relations from 1792. That was the year Yale University set up the first prototype of alumni directory, organised by graduation class. However, early alumni relations efforts and the first alumni associations, including the one established at Williams College, USA in 1821, were entirely voluntary and were maintained by the graduates themselves. The volunteers kept mailing lists, produced publications, organised events, and fundraised for their institutions (More and Smith, 2000). This started to change from 1897 when the University of Michigan hired the first full-time paid alumni secretary. Alumni secretaries became important university officers, who worked closely with the respective institution's leadership. Eventually, universities began to tap into their alumni associations' financial potential by establishing alumni and fundraising offices. These offices were aimed at providing a structured channel for former students to stay involved with their universities and the lives of their fellow graduates. The establishment of the US-based Association of Alumni Secretaries and the publication of the first alumni administration manual in the early 20th century (Figure 2) were highlights of a dynamically evolving area, which saw the number of alumni relations practitioners gradually growing (Sailor, 1930).

Figure 2: Alumni relations milestones (adapted from CASE, 2013)



Reflecting the further development and consolidation taking place in the field of education advancement, two long-standing associations - the American Alumni Council (previously the Association of Alumni Secretaries) and the American College Public Relations Association - merged in 1974 to form the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE). Later, CASE established offices in London (CASE Europe), Singapore (CASE Asia-Pacific) and Mexico City (CASE América Latina). It has become one of the world's largest non-profit educational associations, serving via its headquarters in Washington, D.C. nearly 80,000 advancement professionals, representing more than 3,670 universities, schools and non-profit organisations in 82 countries (“About CASE,” 2016).

Notwithstanding the differences among the various existing alumni relations programmes in diverse national and institutional contexts, the dynamism of the education advancement field in Europe can be demonstrated by the exponential growth in the number of participants in the annual CASE Europe conferences over the past thirty years (More and Smith, 2000). In 2016, nearly a thousand professional staff and volunteers participated in the CASE Europe Annual Conference in Brussels ("Welcome to the CASE Europe Annual Conference," 2016). At the same time, not only the increasing numbers of AR practitioners and countries of their operation, but also the dynamic development of professional resources and standards serve as important indicators of an evolving field. CASE adopted the "Principles of Practice for Alumni Relations Professionals at Educational Institutions" in 2005 and revised them in 2014, to reflect the latest trends and reconfirm principles of alumni relations in the education sector ("Principles of Practice for Alumni Relations Professionals at Educational Institutions," 2014). Also, the International CASE Alumni Relations Survey (ICARS) was developed in 2005. Since then, this annual survey has helped alumni relations practitioners measure their programmes' year-on-year progress. Moreover, ICARS has been instrumental in documenting the evolving alumni relations landscape in Europe and sharing best practices of successful programmes for benchmarking purposes (CASE, 2016, 2015; Kroll, 2014).

Another important professional network, the European Association for International Education (EAIE), organises training programmes and conferences, as well as offers other resources to alumni relations officers via its Alumni Relations Expert Community, initially formed in 2000 as the International Alumni Relations (INTAL)

special interest group. Not only has this community increased the number of affiliates from just a few in the early 2000s to more than 500 professionals in 2016 (“Alumni Relations,” 2016), but it has also significantly contributed to the AR knowledge base via extensive coverage of the latest trends in alumni relations in the professional literature (Conroy and Rincon, 2012; Dobson, 2015).

2.1.2 Alumni relations programme structures

Today, most North American and UK institutions offer some form of alumni relations programmes, including reunion events, alumni clubs, recognition programmes, volunteer initiatives, professional networks and continuing education programmes. Importantly, the work of alumni relations officers provides critical support to their colleagues across their respective institutions. Indeed, CASE in its AR “code of practice” acknowledged collaboration of alumni relations professionals with colleagues in “development, communications and advancement services,” as well as “partnerships with admissions, career services, athletics and student affairs” (“Principles of Practice for Alumni Relations Professionals at Educational Institutions,” 2014).

While many institutions in Central and Eastern Europe have been incorporating alumni relations into their operational activities, these programmes have not undergone the same phases of development as their counterparts in North America or the UK. Indeed, many start-up alumni relations programmes in Europe tend to focus on alumni records management, career monitoring and career support functions for alumni. On the one hand, this is often described as a specific AR

programme approach to effectively deal with issues of student employability (Miller and Schwartz, 2015; Shaindlin, 2015). On the other hand, a shorter history of alumni relations and the lack of a wider culture of alumni engagement may be factors affecting the alumni programming approach in this part of the world.

Another distinctive aspect of AR programmes in the European context is the close relationship with the International Relations offices at many institutions. Quite often, these offices become a hub for programme development and help to start AR functions at their institutions. In these circumstances, and before comprehensive AR programmes are set up, many AR programmes in Europe focus on the needs of alumni abroad, whose support in student recruitment and marketing is deemed especially valuable. Today, both in terms of demographics (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity and nationality) and enrolment modes (including distance learners or part-time students), higher education institutions cater to a much more diverse student population than ever before (Arboleda, 2013). Thus, traditional local alumni events, as well as benefits like the use of the campus library, might not be relevant for graduates who have never visited the campus or cannot easily return to the university. Online-based services (e.g. executive courses or databases), as well as the utilisation of social media for communication with and between alumni help meet the needs of these growing constituencies. Trying to cater for their needs, AR offices are reshaping their publications, events and services in order to appeal to the new generations of globally-positioned and globally-minded graduates (Cohen, 2016a; Conroy and Rincon, 2012; Dobson, 2011, 2015).

Interestingly, alumni relations can be seen as one of the professional areas which thrives on the global "knowledge economy" and benefits from the latest advances in social media. While journalists or financial consultants, for example, might be forced to compete with online “amateurs” (Crook, 2008), alumni relations professionals often embrace the new technologies effectively, which assists them in empowering and engaging more alumni constituencies. In this respect, a blog run by a graduate, or a dynamic online alumni community on Facebook or LinkedIn should be seen as an opportunity, rather than as a challenge. On the other hand, this diversity of resources and tools could be one of the factors contributing to the professional identity strain among AR practitioners, as will be discussed further in this study.

2.2 On Professionalism

While professionalism may be seen as an “artificial construct, with ever-changing and always-contested definitions and traits” (Crook, 2008, p. 23), the “term ‘professional’ remains a much sought after label for those agencies and agents seeking wider recognition and value of their particular knowledge specialism” (Dent and Whitehead, 2002, p. 3). Acknowledging the progress the alumni relations field has made over the past hundred years, and recognising its strides, it is useful to discuss some perspectives on professionalism that might help define the boundaries of alumni relations as a professional area and set up a relevant contextual framework for this study of the professional identity construction of AR specialists in CEE higher education institutions.

Utilising several discourses dealing with issues of professionalism, we can broadly identify three main approaches. The functionalist approach primarily sees a profession as a “productive organization of experts possessing skills and knowledge” (Hodgson, 2005, p. 52), with a particular “checklist” of attainable traits associated with the status of a profession (Greenwood, 1972). This “checklist approach” provided prescriptive definitions of what constitutes a profession, based on autonomy or status. Similarly, it contributed to the notion of professionalization as a somewhat linear process from “non-profession” through “semi-profession” (Etzioni, 1969) to “fully fledged profession” (Elliott, 1972). Likewise, these studies of professions were based on an “assumption, that there is some essential quality or qualities which mark off the professions from other occupations and provide a basis for a distinct body of theory” (Johnson, 1972, p. 10). While useful and practical, this approach has had its limitations related to the alleged neutrality of professions and their concern over public good (Greenwood, 1972). Moreover, it excluded, for example, “the power dimension” (Johnson, 1972, p. 37) of gaining control and securing power positioning to influence decision making and resource allocation by professional communities (Abbott, 1988).

Another approach, based on the historical analyses of professions served as one of the methods of dealing with power and institutional control over professions (Volti, 2008). This approach evolved together with the notion of social closure (Murphy, 1986), which considers professionalization as a way to enhance the rewards, status and labour market position of the individuals within it.

A third group of more recent attempts to conceptualise professions has been primarily interested in the management of professions and the evolution of global professional service companies. It has scrutinised the earlier discourses and their views of occupational unit-based and power-focused professional groups (Hinings, 2005; Reed, 2007), as well as further explored the issues of micropolitics, supercomplexity and evolving modes of professionalism (Cunningham, 2008a). The focus of the discussion has recently shifted to a perceived decrease in the ability of professions to exercise control due to a range of recent developments, including the globalisation of professional services, deregulation, technological advancement, the rise of client driven content culture and managerialism. It has been argued that these trends have triggered the de-mystification of the work jurisdictions, created a more open space for competition and performance benchmarking, and has somewhat eroded the professional credentials system, the closure and control of the occupational unit, as well as the moral standing of professions (Hinings, 2005; Reed, 2007).

Acknowledging the shift in the literature regarding the concepts of profession, professionalisation and professionalism from a functionalist approach to a more critical and fluid understanding of these concepts, we can broadly identify a framework to utilise the following terms for the purposes of this study. Accordingly, the term “profession” can cover occupational associations and groups (Reed, 2007, p. 174), based on their social power and status, and/or certain characteristics, including body of knowledge, a code of conduct and permission to practice, authorised by a professional association. “Professionalisation” or “professional project” (Whitty, 2008) are seen as a process of gaining control as an occupation,

moving from the status of an aspiring to an established profession. Also, it can apply to the process of individual socialisation into a profession. Likewise, “professionalism” may be concerned with principles and competences, as well as the occupational unit or individual in society or among other professionals.

2.2.1 Alumni relations through the prism of professionalism

Recognising the complexity of contemporary understandings of professions, we will see how some of the approaches discussed in the above section could be applied to alumni relations. Are some of the characteristics of a profession, including theoretical, knowledge-based skills, certified education and training, a code of conduct and a professional organisation (Whitty, 2008, pp. 31–32) applicable to the alumni relations professional field? We can argue that alumni relations possesses most of these characteristics (“Principles of Practice for Alumni Relations Professionals at Educational Institutions,” 2014), and is considered one of the educational advancement functions - along with fundraising, communications and marketing. However, from the point of view of “classical professionalism” (Hargreaves and Goodson, 1996, pp. 4–5), even by comparison with their peers in educational advancement, alumni relations professionals do not normally require certification, a national and/or international licence or any other type of specialised training or degree to practise. Following this view, we can possibly talk about alumni relations as a “partially professionalised” (Lortie, 1975, p. 23) field or a “semi-profession” (Etzioni, 1969):

> “A group of new professions whose claim to the status of doctors and lawyers is neither fully established nor fully desired [...]. Their training is shorter, their status is less legitimated, their right to privileged communication less established, and there is less of a specialised body of knowledge and they have less autonomy from supervision or societal control than "the" professions” (Etzioni, 1969, p. v).

Consistently with the perspectives discussed above, alumni relations can be seen as a “professional project.” Indeed, the discourse arising from the field, as well as some recent non-normative “sociological perspectives on professionalism” (Whitty, 2008, p. 32) are pointing towards the growing importance of alumni relations in higher education and society as a whole, allowing us to discuss alumni relations as a “new” evolving profession. On the one hand, “traditional” professions, including law and medicine, have developed a solid “knowledge base,” social structures, value systems and autonomy, which used to serve as cornerstones of professional habitus and identity in their practitioners (Muller, 2009). On the other hand, while swiftly developing a “regional” knowledge base, alumni relations still has to cultivate further its “social organisation” and “disciplinary robustness.” Similarly to some of the so-called “fourth generation professions,” like tourism or information science, the alumni relations multidisciplinary base (communications, events, databases) is “diffuse, fluid [and] less organised.” This, coupled with the lack of a “foundational disciplinary core”, can lead to “identity strain” and “a relatively weak professional identity compared to that of their peers” in more established professions (Muller, 2009, p. 2014). These issues will be further discussed in this study.

2.2.2 Internal and external professional mobility

One of the recent discussions among alumni specialists has evolved around the difference between “institution-bound” and “profession-bound” staff members at higher education institutions. It has been argued that as the “profession has matured,” similarly to doctors and lawyers, AR practitioners “should have skills that are just as transferable” (Nichols, 2011, p. 16). This resembles Whitchurch’s “generalist professional manager,” who transmits “generic experience” from project to project, rather than “being associated with a particular function or institution” (2008, p. 388). Broadly speaking, this trend can also be viewed within Gouldner's construct of “cosmopolitans and locals,” where two latent organisational roles or identity orientations were seen as factors affecting behaviour in complex organisations (1958, 1957). The “local” orientation was linked to the loyalty to the employing organisation, inner reference group and commitment to the local rules, processes and organisation culture. “Cosmopolitans,” on the other hand, are “experts” who are more concerned about issues of their professional expertise, which go beyond organisational boundaries and interests, and are oriented towards outer reference groups. Gouldner studied the university as a complex organisation and discovered four distinct local (*dedicated, true bureaucrat, homeguard* and *elder*) and two cosmopolitan types (*outsider* and *empire builder*) (1958, 1957). The construct was designed to classify various attitudes, values and perceptions of staff members, in order to improve the prediction of behaviour in complex organisations (Grimes and Berger, 1970). While Gouldner’s construct and its subsequent application by other scholars have been critically examined and some concerns related to his methodological approach have been voiced (Chriss, 2015; Grimes,

1980; Grimes and Berger, 1970), it remains an influential theory that has inspired this study.

On a separate but related note, loyalty to the employing organisation and commitment to a professional area do not necessarily compete. On the contrary, they often align, as a strong professional identity can go beyond a commitment to the organisation and provide additional motivation and binding power for occupational communities and individual professionals (Pickering and King, 1995). Likewise, in relation to broader understandings of the "cosmopolitan" or "generalist" professional, both the geographic and the cross-industry contexts within which the alumni relations "professional project" develops appear to be relevant. Indeed, the profession is becoming truly global, as the numbers of alumni relations staff and the countries where alumni offices emerge are growing ("About CASE," 2016; Dobson, 2015, 2011). Moreover, nowadays alumni relations pertains to areas beyond education, such as governmental agencies, foundations and business (Cohen, 2016b). Indeed, many alumni relations specialists, enabled by the transferable skills that come with their profession, move freely from sector to sector. While this type of professional mobility can be seen as a sign of institutional "disloyalty," many would agree that the assessment of a professional's role should be made on the basis of her contribution to an institution, which is often more significant than that of longer-serving staff (Whitchurch, 2008, p. 391).

2.2.3 Programme evaluation

While this is especially apparent on campuses with limited resources, demonstrating programme effectiveness is a challenge for many AR officers (Shaindlin, 2016, 2013). Unlike development programmes, where explicit fundraising goals exist, alumni relations programmes are about connecting alumni to the institution, engaging them with one another, and serving their needs in the hope that those connections will at some point translate into volunteer and financial support. Creating an evaluation strategy for a profession that encompasses many different sizes and types of institutions is difficult. As discussed above, over the past years considerable progress has been made in refining the benchmarking practices intended to help institutions evaluate, plan and support their AR operations (CASE, 2016, 2015; Kroll, 2014). However, the profession still has to make progress in the area of assessment by identifying additional measurements upon which to compare programmes and their effectiveness. More importantly, what should probably accompany the profession's maturation and evolution of its knowledge base is the direction, framing and applicability of any measurement and assessment schemes. Indeed, the focus of the latter should be how to "improve" alumni programmes, rather than how to "prove" their value (Shaindlin, 2016, 2013), a key concern participants in this study repeatedly mentioned, which is often accompanied by an atmosphere of "anger, disappointment, fear, helplessness" (Sparkes, 2007, p. 528).

Often seen as part of the profession's maturation (Scully, 2010) and affected by the growing importance of programme assessment standards (Heemann, 1989), many AR specialists have been utilising performance management and CRM (customer

relations management) systems in order to measure and improve both their own individual and unit performances. While some argue that this practice of measuring and setting targets subverts the work of education professionals to the “tyranny of metrics,” creating “uncertainties about how we should organise ourselves within our work” (Ball, 2008, p. 51), performance management can be viewed as a tool to tackle these uncertainties and navigate within a broader context of “supercomplexity,” i.e. multiplying and contending frameworks of understanding (Barnett, 2000). Moreover, performance management, based on benchmarking and evaluation, can be seen as providing time and space for professionals to reflect upon and make sense of what they do in the context of multiple projects, stakeholders and shifting priorities. Being part of reflection, learning and professional knowledge base expansion, performance management may have some positive implications for the AR professional identity strain and institutional legitimacy concerns, discussed later in this study.

2.3 On Identities

“Identity” is a complex concept that plays an important role in a variety of academic fields and is one of the key components of the conceptual literature framework on professional identity construct. While history of “identity“ as a “project of the self” is traceable from the sixteenth century (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006, p. 7), theory of identity development as a process, occurring from adolescence through adulthood, was developed by Erikson in the 1950s. He believed that identity development is influenced by both the external environment and internal factors (Erikson, 1968). Taking more recent understandings of “identity” into account, the term “references

mutually constructed and evolving images of self and other" (Katzenstein, 1996, p. 59). The current understanding and usage of "identity" as a term and concept are extensive and multi-layered, but for the purposes of this study, an "identity" can refer to either a social category, defined by membership rules, particular attributes or (expected) behaviours, or socially distinguishable features or views that a person takes a pride in. More importantly, viewing the construction of identity as a reflexive process between the individuals ("agency"), with their ability to exercise free will and affect social change, and the structures ("structure"), socially patterned arrangements affecting agency, makes the theory of structuration (Archer, 2003; Giddens, 1991, 1984) one of the key concepts, shaping this study. Indeed, the approach connecting structure and agency allows us to take a fuller account of professional identity construction. As Muller put it:

> "Identity is, like many social science objects, Janus-faced: the one face is identification, induction into a community of practice, joining a club of those with similar values and competences; the other face is individuation, developing one's unique niche or 'voice,' becoming a recognised innovator in an established tradition. The first face points to identity as dependence, conformity to the community's values and standards; the second points to identity as independence and novelty […]."
>
> (2009, p. 214)

Reviewing the literature related to the concept of identities, we see a variety of theoretical underpinnings and applications, ranging from the organisational, managerial and professional (Chreim et al., 2007; Clarke et al., 2009; Hatch and

Schultz, 2004; Higgs, 1993; Jones and Jenkins, 2006; Trede et al., 2012) to “people, work and society” (Watson, 2008) and the way occupational communities perform and interact (Collinson, 2003). The changing nature of power and organisational culture have been important elements of the way identities interact with control mechanisms deployed by the work place (Reed, 2007; Thompson and Warhurst, 1998). Adding more service-oriented occupational relationships to the blend of the new era of “knowledge economy” (Lauder et al., 2012) has created a new focus on multi-skilled professionals (Noon et al., 2013), with a greater emphasis on the identities of employees and the way they are linked to work performance (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Edwards and Wajcman, 2005; Thomas and Linstead, 2002).

With the varied literature on identities, it is useful to outline some of the dominant perspectives on understanding the concept according to different ontological approaches, including functionalist, interpretive/constructionist and critical. More mainstream and functionalist social identity theory views identities as rather fixed and static entities, focusing on individuals’ identification with group/social identities and how they can be linked to organisational performance (Haslam, 2004). This conceptualisation of belonging to a group can be both communal (e.g. “mother” or “father”) and occupational or organisational, based on shared identity construction and evaluation, which distinguishes the members of the group from others (Hogg, 2006). While being widely utilised, this discourse has been criticised for seeing identity as a rather simplified individual cognitive phenomenon, not paying adequate attention to social processes and the fluid nature of identity (re)negotiation (King and Ross, 2004; Wetherell and Potter, 1992), growth and maturation, or identity “project” (Henkel, 2000). This “project” of continuous redesigning or modifying identities

throughout life involves a dynamic interaction and repositioning between individuals and the structures, within which they operate (Giddens, 1991).

At the same time, interpretivist/constructionist accounts of identities seek to illuminate the performativity aspects of identities and the meaning around them, focusing on "the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants" (Bryman and Bell 2007, p.402). The conceptualisation of identities is accomplished in the context of social interaction rather than within a fixed "label" attached to a group or individual. Indeed, this view of identities takes into consideration "[…] how our selves are socially constructed through interactions with others" (Knights and Willmott, 1990, p. 74) and how, through the metaphor of theatrical performance, the everyday life provides the "front" or "backstage" interaction of "actors" with the "audience" (Goffman, 1959). While giving more emphasis to the individual dynamic of identity, the approach has been criticised for missing the wider social context and its power dynamic. Indeed, such critical accounts have utilised power-sensitive lenses of identity approaches to explore the ways identities can be manipulated, resisted, regulated or (self)-alienated (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Costas and Fleming, 2009; Davies and Thomas, 2008). This discourse can be linked to the poststructuralist approach to identities, investigating the principles of power, knowledge and discourse, theorised by Foucault and followed by other scholars' critical examination (Foucault, 1982, 1977; Martin, 2005; McKinlay and Starkey, 1998).

Consequently, each of these main approaches also incorporates different conceptualisations of the two most influential dualisms found across different discourses. One of the dichotomies in identity theories has to do with seeing

identities either as essential or as constructed. Accordingly, “essentialist theories locate identity ‘inside’ persons, as a product of minds, cognition, the psyche or socialisation practices” (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006, p. 9), while constructed theories consider identity as a social construction, repositioned “from the ‘private’ realms of cognition and experience, to the ‘public’ realms of discourse and other semiotic systems of meaningmaking” (2006, p. 4). Related to this, and more instrumental for this study, is dualism of “agency” and “structure.” Are people free to construct their identity in “any way they wish” or is “identity construction […] constrained by forces of various kinds” (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006, p. 10)? Importantly, identity construction can be seen as a pivot frame for a better understanding of the dynamic interaction of structure and agency, and “a fundamental bridging concept between the individual and society. Its potential mediating quality lies in its dual character – it refracts what can be seen as a ‘permanent dialectic’ between the self and social structure” (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 300). Indeed, as shown in Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis, key themes that relate to theories of structure and agency, or the way that the individual interacts with the contexts in which they find themselves (Delanty, 2008; Giddens, 1991) are related to the findings of this study, including the role of individual career trajectory and institutional structures in the process of professional identity construction, as well as individual legitimisation efforts in the context of professional identity strain and a lack of a robust professional knowledge base.

2.3.1 Defining professional identity

As shown above, the literature which covers the variety of concepts of identity is vast and diverse. However, “the research base for professional identity development

formation" is not fully formed yet and a focus on identity development processes “informed by clearly articulated understandings of ‘professional identity’” is missing (Trede et al., 2012, p. 379). Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study, professional identity is defined as one’s professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences (Ibarra, 1999; Schein, 1978). The study of professional identity has been anchored within the notion of personal identity, described as the sense of self and affected by the attachment of “the various meanings” of “self and others” (Gecas and Burke, 1995, p. 42). Moreover, while there is no single identity, there is a possibility for a primary identity that shapes all others within a given period of time and space.

Professional roles are generically described in this study as ‘functions’, while professional identity would usually be referred to as ‘meanings’ (Castells, 1997, p. 7). In this respect, the professional identity construct can cover both “micro-practices of enacting a job and making sense of the work” to be done (Ashcraft, 2007, p. 12). Professional identity can therefore be seen as a set of attributes constructed in two main ways: the personal and the social. A person’s life experiences and inborn traits, such as temperament, play an important role in shaping the sense of self and thus, influence professional identity (Schein, 1978). On the other hand, professional identity construction does not occur in a vacuum. Indeed, it is the result of the socialisation, adjustment and adaptation in the context of the work environment, especially during career transition (Hall, 1987; Ibarra, 1999).

Finally, the professional identity context provides for the individual development of access to the knowledge base, sets of skills, ways of being and values shared by

other members of the profession. In this process of identity construction, one identifies oneself as a "member of that category of people that make up the profession" and "this professional membership thus becomes part of one's identity" (Trede et al., 2012, p. 380). Indeed, professional "identity development and professional socialization are framed as a process of negotiated meaning-making within a community of practice" (Hunter et al., 2007, p. 67).

Reflection, as part of professional identity development, is "the important mediator between experience and identity" (De Weerdt et al., 2006, p. 318). Linked to Schon's work on the "reflective practitioner" (1983), the process of professional identity construction can be affected by a variety of perceived workplace challenges and "critical incidents" (Cunningham, 2008b). Often, the verbal accounts of these incidents do not appear dramatic, but as David Tripp argues they are, "[…] commonplace events that occur in routine professional practice which are critical in the rather different sense that they are indicative of underlying trends, motives and structures. At first sight, these incidents appear 'typical' rather than 'critical', but are rendered critical through analysis" (1993, pp. 24–25). Some form of self-examination, which Giddens refers to as "reflexive monitoring", linked to action rationalisation and motivation often follows these occurrences (1984, p. 5). Moreover, as this study indicates, the way AR professionals utilise some form of self-examination may convert a challenge into a positively transforming experience, affect learning and professional growth, or may sometimes lead to a professional identity stretch. For instance, as discussed further in this study, some AR specialists are demoralised by a lack of legitimacy and continuous demands to prove themselves as professionals. At the same time, others may be able to learn from it

by deploying some form of self-examination, leading to a positively transforming experience, as one of the respondents in the present study did by making her case for funding in front of her institutional board (Chapter 5).

2.3.2 Alumni relations' professional identities in the higher education context

While many European universities are starting to invest more resources into alumni relations, these often initial steps to invest in project-based part-time staff can be seen as signs of following short-term trends, rather than a long-term strategy (Taylor and Onion, 1998). Many AR offices manage these limitations by outsourcing their publications, events management and other functions to other units in their institutions. In the context of limited resources, the AR operation is often viewed as a cross-function of several units. Such a multi-directional collaborative environment can be seen as a contributing factor to the formation of the "cross-boundary" (Whitchurch, 2008) character of the AR professional identity.

The perceived lack of special and extended AR professional training (Chapters 4 and 5) and the limitations of the AR theoretical base have been mitigated by "tacit learning" and the "collaborative" (Whitty and Wisby, 2006) nature of alumni relations as a professional discipline. Indeed, the peer support network available to alumni relations specialists facilitates both formal and informal knowledge transfer (Freidson, 2001). It is conceivable that the collaborative nature of alumni relations can be attributed to and is affected by several factors, including:

- a need to acquire professional knowledge with limited access to special training;
- interfacing and the connective roles, viable among main client groups and an institution, for instance within the “triple-helix” context of university-industry-government relationships (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 1998);
- the possible “cross-boundary” and “unbounded” (Whitchurch, 2008) nature of professional identity markers of alumni relations professionals.

As discussed before (Section 2.2.2), “cosmopolitans and locals” (Gouldner, 1958, 1957) can be compared to “boundaryless” and "boundaried" (Dowd and Kaplan, 2005) identities and careers, adding to Whitchurch's typology (2009) of "bounded", "cross-boundary", "unbounded" and "blended" identities (Table 1), which may enrich the understanding of and relevance for both academic and professional staff in higher education institutions. Two recent studies on professional identity in UK higher education have shown interesting examples of further utilisation of Whitchurch’s framework “as a heuristic device.” Lewis is focused on the construction of professional identity within UK higher education administration and management (Lewis, 2012), while Daly explores the role of professional identities in shaping philanthropic fundraising in British higher education. It is relevant to the present research that Daly’s study was conducted among directors responsible for fundraising and/or alumni relations. He considers that “Whitchurch’s framework is best placed to capture the multifaceted nature of the roles of directors of development and mix of cross-boundary and unbounded professional identities to which these give rise” (Daly, 2013, p. 22).

Table 1: Typology of professional identities (adapted from Whitchurch, 2009, p. 408)

Identity dispositions	Characteristics
Bounded professionals	Work within clear structural boundaries (e.g. function, job description)
Cross-boundary professionals	Use boundaries for strategic advantage and institutional capacity building
Unbounded professionals	Disregard boundaries to focus on broadly based projects and institutional development
Blended professionals	Dedicated appointments spanning professional and academic domains

Depicted in the literature, the ongoing connecting and communicating patterns, extensive utilisation of internal institutional resources, coupled with a high level of exposure to and interaction with the external environment can add another "connective" identity layer to AR specialists. Indeed, within the context of the "knowledge economy," the existence of universities in a "supercomplex age" (Barnett, 2000) provides a fertile ground for an evolving dual identity in alumni relations: the "communicative" and "connective." Related to this duality of identity proposition, there are several aspects of the "realizing university" that contribute to the connective nature of the alumni relations professional. Accordingly, Barnett's "moving borders," applied to the "map of inquiry" (2000, p. 108) – i.e. the bureaucratic structure of the university and its "engagement" with multiple communities – appear to fit well into the alumni relations professional's "communicative" and "connective" roles. These are important because of the increasing complexity of other producers of knowledge and the increasing number of

clients waiting to be served and listened to (Barnett, 2000, p. 109). Indeed, the connective roles of alumni relations professionals within their institutions, and among the students, alumni, and external actors, place them in a pivotal position at the centre of the "triple-helix" model of university-industry-government relations (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 1998).

Likewise, a recent study of alumni programmes in the UK positioned alumni relations in a variety of cross-functional and cross-unit institutional networks. Some of cases covered in this research used multiple strategic affinity circles, which involve alumni relations, career services and international recruitment. Other examples include the "tripartite" model for connecting with students, "engaging multiple communities" and "student lifecycle" (Miller, 2013, p. 7). Similarly, Langley (2013) argues that a professional portfolio of numerous services to be delivered to multiple client groups - including donors, faculty members, alumni, corporations, potential students and government offices - requires a professional with qualities and roles that fit into five broad areas:

- **awareness-builders**, who "educate, inform and spread the messages of the institution through various communication channels;"
- **cultivators**, who "move students, alumni, donors and other opinion leaders from initial, casual connections with the institution to deeper levels of engagement;"
- **involvers**, who "build and broaden communities by managing boards, staging events, creating interactive forums or undertaking other activities that get key constituents" to get more involved;

- **commitment-seekers**, who serve as student recruiters, major gifts officers, legislative lobbyists and others who "close the deal by securing agreements from individuals in various constituency groups;"
- **sustainers**, who "perform stewardship functions or act as liaisons to certain constituency groups, like board of trustees" (Langley, 2013).

The above characteristics of communicating and connecting with multiple communities (Miller, 2013) and building long-term sustainable relationships (Langley, 2013), seen as parts of “the constitution of the systems of interactions” (Giddens, 1984, p. 396), can provide a useful dimension for further reflection in the analysis of the professional identity of alumni relations specialists. Indeed, a perceived duality of communicative and connective characteristics of AR professional identity can be seen through the lenses of structure and agency (Giddens, 1991), whereby structure affects identity of AR specialists by hosting complex AR job portfolios and roles linked to multiple stakeholders. Peculiarity of this assumption is that AR communicative and connecting professional functions can belong to different level of analysis and direction of actions, therefore potentially creating some form of disharmony or identity strain, as discussed further in Chapter 5 of this thesis. For instance, by being responsible for strength of connection with alumni, i.e. alumni relations, AR officers do not always have much influence over content of institutional message, which they often have to communicate to alumni. In a situation of possible disagreement with institutional message, and being loyal to both employing institution and alumni, AR specialists can have a dilemma of balancing between long-term relationship with alumni and immediate institutional communication needs. Perceived complexity of such a dual “communicative” and

“connective” identity, can both enrich our understanding of AR professional identity scope and help to sensitise some of the identity strain issues further discussed in Chapter 5.

2.5 Conclusion

Chapter 2 has offered an overview of the literature and theoretical context for this study. As the primary question of this research is AR specialists’ professional identity and the identification of the factors contributing to its construction within CEE universities, literatures on “alumni relations,” “professionalism” and “identity” have been discussed in order to achieve a dynamic account of the nature of the AR professional activity and individuals who interpret their roles and experiences. Accordingly, this research approaches the construction of identity as a reflexive process between individuals and the structures in which they operate (Delanty, 2008; Giddens, 1991, 1984). Notably, this study is inspired by Whitchurch’s categories of professional identity (Whitchurch, 2013, 2010, 2006), as well as Gouldner's construct of “cosmopolitans and locals” (Gouldner, 1958, 1957; Grimes, 1980; Grimes and Berger, 1970). The complexity of the discourses and AR professional roles, coupled with a lack of extensive research on AR specialists means that analysing their identities and related variables requires flexible a research design and methodology, to be discussed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 – RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides an overview of the theoretical underpinnings, research design and methodology used for this study. It includes the sampling procedure, an overview of the sample population, data collection and data analysis. It also deals with ethical considerations, as well as issues of credibility. All these elements are interrelated and form what Mason describes as a "methodological strategy" or "logic by which you go about answering your research questions" (Mason, 2002, p. 30).

3.1 Theoretical Underpinnings

The very nature of this study, focusing on constructing professional identities, has required the application of a qualitative paradigm which views social properties as constructed by people, rather than existing on their own. Indeed, there is no "objective truth waiting for us to discover," but rather truth "comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities of our world" (Crotty, 1998, pp. 8–9). It is qualitative research, which "consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). Hence, to gain a deeper understanding of the personal stories of research participants, in order to "catch the meanings" and interpret social actions, *interpretivism* is selected as the epistemological approach for this study. An interpretivist approach, associated with social constructionism (Robson, 2011), indicates a focus on understanding the complex world of lived experiences and context-specific meanings, constructed and interpreted by those involved in it (Burr, 2003; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Schwandt,

2007). Importantly, a qualitative interpretive approach is considered particularly appropriate, due to lack of previous research and accurate theory, as well as a need "to explore and describe the phenomena and to develop theory" (Morse, 1991, p. 120). Indeed, as the above literature review has shown, alumni relations practitioners have not been substantially researched or covered in the practitioner literature, and even less, in scholarly works.

Linked to the lack of research, the research design of this qualitative study is based on an inductive relationship between theory and research (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Being concerned with the generation of new theory, the analysis and processing of the emerging data have been guided by "iterative and spiral" rather than "linear and cumulative" knowledge formation (Scott and Usher, 1999, p. 227). As shown in Section 3.3 below, multilevel conceptual frameworks are utilised and themes are developed in parallel, with repeated cross-checking and sifting through the data via a spiral movement, rather than a straight continuum of data accumulation.

Finally, a reference has to be made to the ethnographic aspects of this research. The reference is "a question of general style rather than of following specific prescriptions" (Robson, 2011, p. 143). Accordingly, this study is not an ethnography, but "ethnographic moments" (Scott and Usher, 1999, p. 83) has become an integral part of this investigation on the development of the professional identity of AR specialists in Central and Eastern European higher education. Individuals of different age, gender, cultural background and nationality participated in the research. Their professional experience occurred across a wide range of institutions, education systems, geographic locations, diverse stakeholders and alumni constituencies.

Ethnographic principles, including uncovering shared meanings, gaining insider's perspective and producing rich data (Robson, 2011) facilitated the acknowledgement of these differences, and helped to inform individual accounts within the broader context of social interaction, beliefs and work practices.

Following these ontological and epistemological underpinnings, and before describing the data collection methods in the next section, one has to briefly address the issue of the validity of this study. While suggesting that a valid qualitative research should be credible, transferable, dependable, confirmable and authentic, Bryman and Bell state that any such research account would be based on one of many possible representations, rather than a "definitive [version] of social reality" (2007, p. 415). Additional criteria for a valid qualitative research may include a substantial topic, rigour, sincerity, credibility, resonance, contribution, coherence and ethics (Tracy, 2010). While all these criteria are part of social constructs themselves, they form a coherent framework, which is utilised for the purposes of this study. Indeed, Chapter 1 deals with the relevance of the study and the significance of its research topic. Most aspects relevant to issues of credibility, rigour, coherence and ethics are discussed in Chapter 3, dealing with research design and methodology. Lastly, the possible contribution and resonance of this study are discussed in the final part of this thesis, Chapter 5.

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

Undertaking this qualitative, interpretative research required a “narrative” mode of investigation (Prasad et al., 2007), focusing on the description and interpretation of professional roles and identities. Accordingly, *semi-structured interviews* have been selected as the most appropriate method of data collection, as this was most likely to generate evidence to answer my research questions within the overall conceptual framework. Indeed, interviews are believed to capture the complexity of professional roles and identities and can be analysed on a number of levels: for instance, in terms of a biographical narrative, as well as professional knowledge and relationships (Cohen, 2006). As Kvale notes: “The knowledge produced in an interview comes close to postmodern conceptions of knowledge as conversational, narrative, linguistic, contextual, and interrelational” (1996, p. 51). Semi-structured interviews are thought to fit this study’s methodological position well and considered to provide a flexible interactive platform for gaining participants’ perceptions, thus constituting a “humanistic” approach (Plummer, 2001). Gillham refers to the semi-structured interview as “the most important form of interviewing” (2000, p. 65) due to its flexible nature, potential richness of data and the possibility to limit the interviewer’s own bias. Indeed, this semi-structured interview format allowed the researcher to improvise, modifying the wording and flow of questions without leading interviewees into a particular direction. Inductive accounts were developed, which allowed an active and reflexive interviewing process. It was interaction with study participants, talking and listening to them, collecting their accounts and articulations,

which enabled a legitimate way to generate data, while adapting questions as appropriate. Likewise, my research questions about constructing professional identity were designed to explore social reality through “people’s knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions” (Mason, 2002, pp. 63-64).

The interview preparation and conduct of this study were guided by Mason’s core features of semi-structured interviews:

- “[t]he interactional exchange of dialogue,” taking place “face to face, or over the telephone or the Internet;”
- “[a] relatively informal style;”
- “a number of topics, themes or issues” to touch upon, and, at the same time, “fluid and flexible structure,” allowing “to develop unexpected themes;”
- “meaning and understanding are created in an interaction” of researcher and interviewees, aimed at “the construction or reconstruction of knowledge.”

(2002, pp. 62–63)

While matching the theoretical underpinnings and research questions of this study, semi-structured interviews have some practical limitations, including possible financial and geographic constraints (if travel is involved); time required to conduct, transcribe and analyse interviews (King, 1994); negotiating access, as well as reliance on the interviewer’s the skills and personality (Arksey and Knight, 1999). Although the latter could be mitigated by careful preparation and conducting pilot

interviews, time and financial constraints were decisive factors in favour of choosing online technology for conducting semi-structured interviews.

3.2.2 Skype interviews

The nature of this study and its interview sample were the main reasons for Skype, a popular Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technology, to be chosen as the medium through which all the interviews for this study were to be conducted. With the increasing geographic spread, as well as the growing popularity of Skype in education and research, synchronous (real-time) technologies, such as Skype, offer an alternative research interview venue to collect qualitative data (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013; Hanna, 2012). Indeed, the recent technological developments have contributed to the evolution of online interviewing as part of qualitative inquiry and have overcome some limitations related to on-site face-to-face interviews (Hooley et al., 2012). The reported advantages of Skype interviews are:

- low cost (free or low cost calls over the Internet, no travel costs);
- time saving (no need to travel to reach an interview location);
- comfort zone effect (choice of a neutral, safe location);
- availability and flexibility (more flexible short notice scheduling);
- practicality and acceptability (Skype installed, tried and widely available);
- visual contact via live video stream (Hanna, 2012; Hay-Gibson, 2009).

While the VoIP method for remote interviews is becoming “an alternative to the ‘gold standard‘ of face-to-face interviews” (Hay-Gibson, 2009, p. 46), it is important to note

the difficulty of picking up non-verbal cues in VoIP calls. Indeed, when using this technology, it is sometimes more challenging to establish trust between interviewer and interviewee. The researcher utilising this method has to possess skills related to presentation on-camera and "interview techniques to improve interviewer rapport with the participant for the chance to collect more granular data" (2009, p. 46). In this respect, the Skype live video feature "helps to partially surmount issues around spatiality and physical interaction" (Hanna, 2012, p. 241). Moreover, as an experienced Skype and social media user for professional and networking purposes, I felt I was adequately prepared to utilise this technology for the purposes of this study.

Also, there were other limitations of this method of data collection to be considered before undertaking this study. Among the disadvantages of using Skype for qualitative interviews, various authors (Hanna, 2012; Hay-Gibson, 2009; Pretto and Pocknee, 2008) have reported the following:

- possible technical problems related to sound and video quality;
- issues related to Internet connection speed, such as a lag in the live feed;
- possible lack of access to or of familiarity with VoIP technology;
- difficulty with receiving and processing non-verbal cues;
- obtaining informed consent.

While all the above concerns are valid, the earlier listed benefits of using Skype strongly outweigh its disadvantages. Thus, with careful preparation and planning,

efforts were made to mitigate the drawbacks associated with online interviewing (see Interview Logistics).

3.2.3 Documents

Documents are a “broad range of written and symbolic records,” which were not prepared for a particular research, but rather for specific personal or professional purposes (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 99). While not constituting a separate method of data collection for this study, relevant documents were analysed to support the interview preparation process, as well as to enrich and crystallise (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) data gathered via interviews. Such documents included the participating institutions’ latest annual reports and strategic plans, institutional organograms, the mission statements of alumni relations units, as well as job and office descriptions available via institutional web sites. Importantly, the focus was not on the quantitative analysis of the documents, but rather on the discovery of the “documentary reality” of the alumni relations specialists in each participating university (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, pp. 45-46). Finally, the analysis of documents helped identify participants for the interviews, cross-check institutional data and AR programme details.

3.2.4 Interview sample

This study, as most qualitative research projects, required a small and purposive sample, since the goal was “to look at a ‘process’ or the ‘meanings’ individuals attribute to their given social situation, not necessarily to make generalizations”

(Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006, p. 70). Accordingly, I adopted a “purposeful selection” of interviewees, as suggested by Wengraf (2001, pp. 95–96). Due to the limited time-frame and international nature of this fine-grained small-scale study, the interview sample was meant to be limited to approximately 15 participants. The criteria of “accessible”, “ordinary” and “unusual” cases (Creswell, 1998), coupled with a comparative regional setting were to shape the final interview pool. Initially, I planned to compare three countries of the CEE region, with each country providing approximately one-third of the interview pool. However, it became obvious during the search and selection phase, described below, that the largest proportion of qualified and available interviewees was based in Hungary, with Russia providing two and Ukraine one qualified interview candidates. In order to meet the interview pool criteria, and to stay within the target sample size and a realistic time-frame, the decision was made to expand the number of CEE countries participating in the research and to keep in the selection pool tentatively confirmed quality interview candidates, primarily from Hungary. After careful deliberation and consultations with my thesis supervisors, it was considered to be appropriate for the purposes of this study to have 50% of the informants coming from Hungary and the further 50% from other countries of the Central and Eastern European region.

As alumni relations is still a novelty function for many Central and Eastern European universities, the often ambiguous office positioning and its public promotion (in English) via institutional web sites was a challenge in identifying and accessing prospective interviewees. I did not want to use my existing professional contacts as the sole basis for this study’s interview sample in order to avoid, as much as possible, any bias in the selection process. To address that challenge, in identifying

an appropriate sample I decided to utilise two professional networks. These networks were the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) and the European Association for International Education (EAIE). Being a professional member of both organisations, I have access to membership networks. The membership directories provide location specific information, as well as give some ideas about institutional priorities and interests, as far as particular areas of educational advancement and professional development are concerned.

Having in mind that this study focuses on Central and Eastern Europe, I identified about twenty institutions in the CEE region that had some degree of alumni relations activity and could potentially yield enough qualified interview participants. Following preliminary online research, twenty-five individuals from twenty institutions were approached by email and asked to participate as interviewees and/or helpers in identifying other relevant staff at their institutions, who might be interested in participating in the study. Fluent English was a necessary requirement to participate in the study. Also, it was acknowledged that, depending on the internal institutional regulations, permission to participate in a study of this type might need to be secured from the appropriate institutional authority. Accordingly, twenty-one individuals, with secured permission to participate in the study, expressed their initial interest in participating in or supporting the research. Based on the institutional type, its educational profile, size, history and location, a purposive sample of thirteen institutions was taken in eight countries. This sample mix yielded sixteen in-depth interviews in total, conducted during the period of this study.

Table 2: General interview statistics

Country	City	Institutions covered	Interviews conducted
Estonia	Tartu	1	1
Latvia	Riga	1	1
Czech Republic	Brno	1	1
Hungary	Budapest	4	7
	Pécs	1	1
Russia	Moscow	2	2
Ukraine	Kyiv	1	1
Croatia	Zagreb	1	1
Bulgaria	Blagoevgrad	1	1
8 countries	**9 cities**	**13 institutions**	**16 interviews**

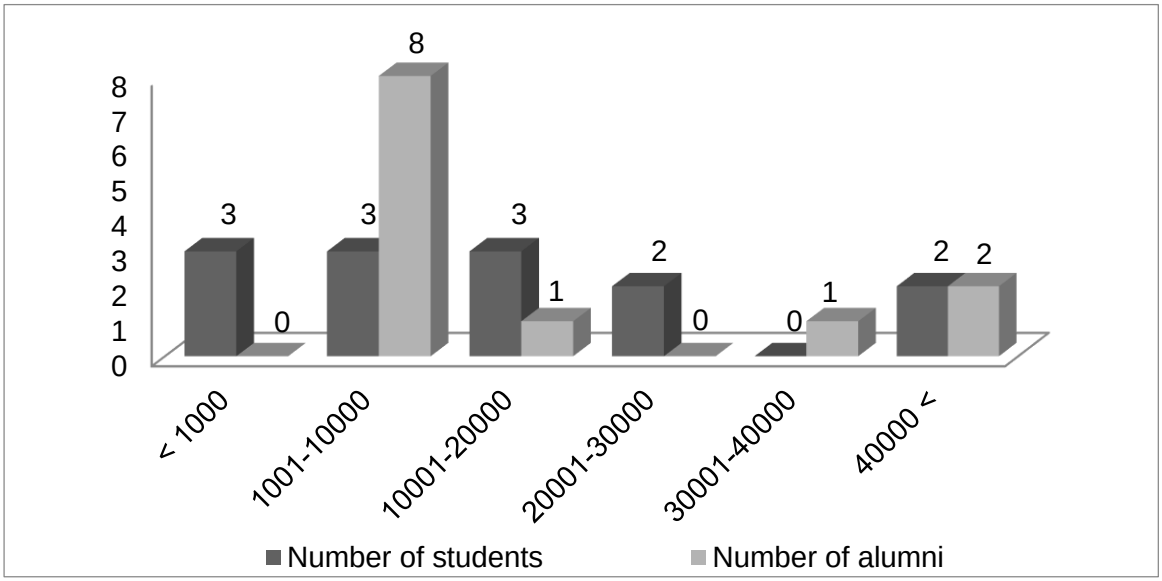
As can be seen from Table 2, Hungary accounts for 50% of informants. As mentioned above, the sample was set-up to have an equal representation of Hungarian and international respondents, while providing for more diversity in types of institutions and programmes. Indeed, a brief description of each university in Table 3 may provide a further account of what may be considered a balanced and varied institutional sample. To ensure confidentiality, participating institutions were randomly assigned letter codes, linked to research participant pseudonyms, based on the same first letter and gender of research participants.

Table 3: Institutional profiles and research participants

Institution	Profile	Description	Participants
A	Liberal Arts	A young private university on a rural campus with around 1000 students	Alexandra
B	Classical university	An ancient, city-based state university with over 70 000 students	Beatrice
C	Classical university	An old state university on a large urban campus with over 40 000 students	Chris
D	Classical university	An ancient state university on a city-based campus, around 15 000 students	Daisy
E	History, Law, Politics	A young private university on a small city campus, around 200 students	Elliott
F	Social Sciences, Liberal Arts, IT	A young state university on a city-based campus, around 18 000 students	Fiona, Felicity
G	Liberal Arts, Economics, Tourism	A young private university on a city-based campus, around 7000 students	Grace, Gertrude
H	Medical university	An ancient state university with over 10 000 students on various campuses	Hugo, Holly
I	Classical university	An ancient state university on a city-based campus, over 20 000 students	Isabelle
J	Medicine, Social Sciences, Law	An old university on an urban campus with around 6700 students	Janet
K	Economics & Social Sciences	A young state university with 25 000 students on urban campuses	Kevin
L	Economics	A young private university on a rural campus with over 400 students	Leila
M	IR, Economics, Management, Law	A young private university on a city-based campus with 5000 students	Marie

Reflecting general trends in the higher education of Central and Eastern Europe, eight out of thirteen participating universities were state institutions. At the same time, a wider and more varied distribution of student enrolment and alumni populations, which has a more direct link to the size and form of alumni relations programmes, reflect a diverse sample (Figure 3) for this study.

Figure 3: Student enrolment and alumni population per participating institution



Such a diversity of institutional contexts adds value to the research pool and enables cross-institutional analysis. Data collected for student enrolment and alumni populations helped to get a more nuanced understanding of the participating institutions in regards to their constituent base. More importantly for AR professional identity construction, the wide range of constituent numbers ensures that this study covers a variety of AR operations, dealing with a relatively low or high number of clients. What is described later in this study as a “small-shop” AR office, together with the size of the client group, creates an environment which can either be seen as an “alumni and students’ family environment” or a “huge network” in which many AR practitioners see themselves as “small fish in a big pond.”

Turning our attention to individual respondent characteristics shown in Figures 4 and 5, the sample of interviewees comprised an appropriate gender and age range. While age distribution is more balanced, there is a pronounced majority of female

participants. Both ratios are overall in line with the higher education sector trends ("Country Overview by Indicator, Country and Year," 2016, "HESA - Higher Education Statistics Agency," 2014).

Figure 4: Research participants by gender

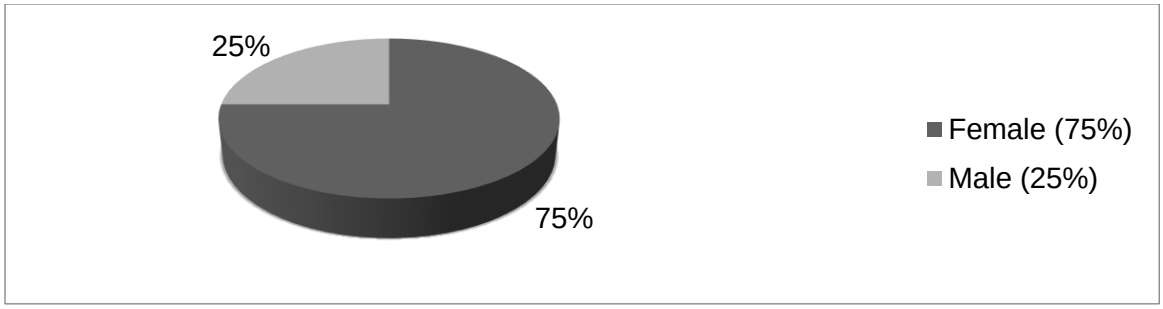
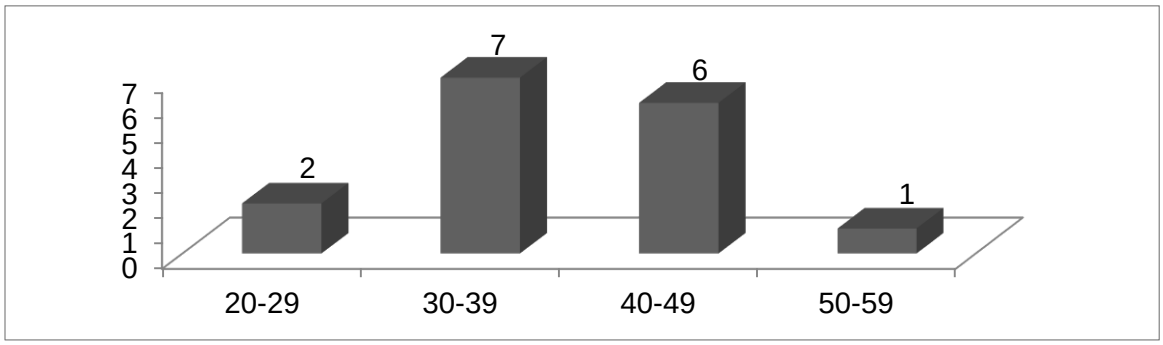
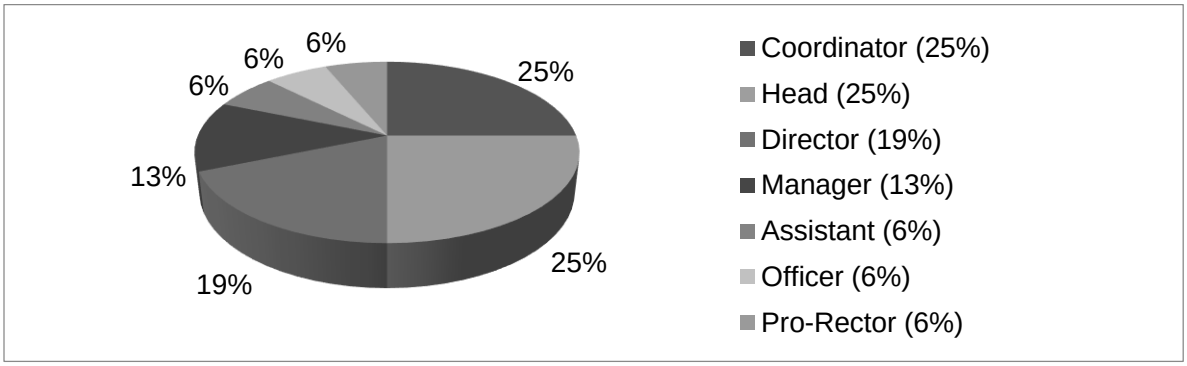


Figure 5: Research participants by age



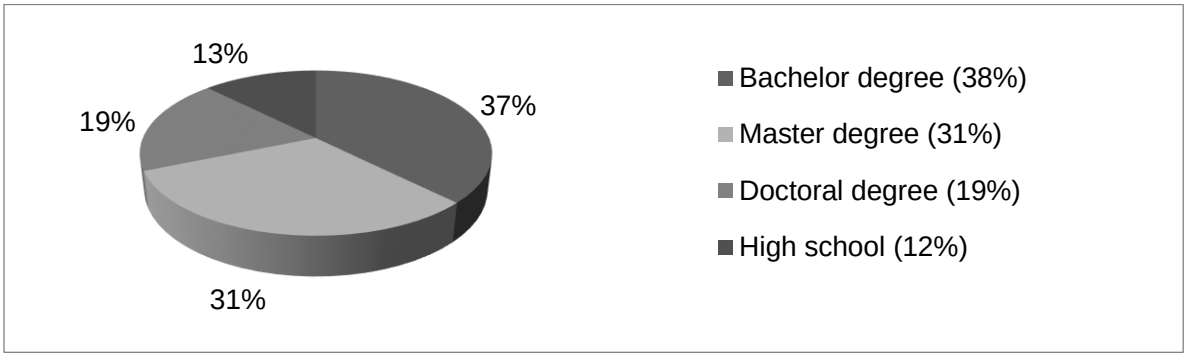
While no direct comparison of level of seniority or titles is possible due to the transnational and multi-institutional nature of this study, a wide range of seniority and job titles is well reflected in the sample (Figure 6). For the reader's convenience, a detailed list of respondents, their positions and bio data is attached in Appendix 1.

Figure 6: Research participants by title/level of seniority



As Figure 7 indicates, the interviewee sample represents a variety of levels of academic qualifications of alumni relations practitioners. Having doctoral (19%) and non-degree studies (12%) characterises less than a third of the total pool of research participants. The largest proportion of respondents have either undergraduate (38%) or graduate degrees (31%). While being of relevance to the interview sample, respondents' academic degree levels were not found of particular significance to the findings of this study. As discussed in Section 4.3, respondents' fields of study and professional area of affiliation appear to be more important for the construct of their AR professional identity than their study degree levels.

Figure 7: Research participants by degree level



3.2.5 Conducting interviews

All selected interview participants were contacted prior to the interviews and given all the necessary specifics in regards to the purposes of the study, logistical details, anonymity and confidentiality. They were asked to complete a short pre-interview questionnaire (Appendix 3), requesting some basic biographical details. To get closer to a face-to-face interview experience, Skype was suggested as the venue for online interviewing. The “full screen” video function allowed us to enlarge the streamed image to the maximum size of the computer screen utilised on a given occasion. This enabled me to see the interview participant closer, with more details and visual cues, avoiding long pauses, thus creating an authentic conversation experience, and helping to overcome a possible barrier in developing rapport (King and Horrocks, 2010).

Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes in length. Although, Skype has an audio and video recording function, online video and audio recording were intentionally avoided, as recorded visual online content is still not a common practice and might have raised some confidentiality and privacy issues (Bertrand and Bourdeau, 2010). Instead, a separate digital voice recorder was used to record the interviews. As Legard *et al.* (2003) note, audiotaping the interview ensures that the depth and nuances of the conversation can be adequately analysed, while the researcher can fully focus on conducting the interview. The recordings were transcribed in order to analyse the data. Importantly, for me transcribing was a process of interpretation, rather than a true representation of the full interview account. In some instances, parts of the interview, which were not considered relevant to the study, were marked

as such for future references, thus omitted from the working version of the transcript. Also, some relevant visual details and non-verbal cues, such as a laugh or sarcastic smile on the interviewee's face, were added to the interview transcript, often accompanied by a note, with the intention of aiding future data interpretation. Consequently, transcription was undertaken as a matter of practicality rather than as an "objective record" of the interviews (Mason, 2002).

While the project description and the necessary approval forms were emailed to each informant prior to the interview, at the beginning of each Skype session I briefed the interviewee about the timing and details of recording, note taking, access to individual transcripts, confidentiality and their right to decline to answer and stop the interview at any point. Specifically, by way of reading out the Consent Form and confirming that the positive verbal answer was audio recorded, I asked each participant to re-confirm his/her willingness to participate in the research.

The interviews were conducted between September 2014 and January 2015 and took place when and where it was convenient to the interviewees. The interviews were conducted via Skype from my office premises, ensuring a neutral and professional background. At the same time, all possible efforts were made to arrange a convenient time and place for the interviewees to feel at ease in an environment they were comfortable in and familiar with. The vast majority of informants were at their work-place during the interview, which provided some visual cues and readily prompted a conversation about the physical location of their offices. Overall, the flexible online interview setting allowed "both the researcher and the researched" "to remain in a 'safe location' without imposing on each other's personal

space" (Hanna, 2012, p. 241). While no privacy concerns related to this online form of interview were raised by the informants, I was prepared to brief them on the protocol (VoIP) used by Skype, which codes the data via "short, random and unique" coding so that it becomes "almost untraceable" (Bertrand and Bourdeau, 2010, p. 71) for any third party.

Due to the nature of this study about constructing professional identities, the interview questions were covering both professional roles (facts and behaviour) and professional identities (beliefs and attitudes). Bearing in mind the complexity of identity constructs and interpretation of meanings, and based on the literature review, one-to-one Skype interviews, aimed at grasping the "lived reality" (Scott and Usher, 1999, p. 87), were set up to focus on the following broad themes (Appendix 4): relevant educational and professional background prior to AR position; current role and identity; institutional space and positioning; relationships with internal stakeholders/clients; relationships with external stakeholders/clients.

As indicated above, the interviews started with taking contextual and bio information, such as name, age, and position in the institution, so that it could assist in analysing the sample and the interview transcripts. Also, these questions helped to "warm up" by building a rapport with informants and gave interviews an appropriate flow, in order "to ease the interviewee down from the everyday, social level to a deeper level at which" [we could] "together focus on a specific topic or set of topics" (Legard et al., 2003, p. 144). Importantly, as Rapley (2001) suggests, topics initiated according to the interview guide were then followed up, when appropriate, by "why do you think that" questions, probing what was said in order to get more details, allowing enough

flexibility to explore the individual pathways of informants and, later, helping develop a coding frame.

As a fellow practitioner talking to colleagues in a conversation, a dialogue-type mode seemed to be the most appropriate style of conducting interviews, in line with Kvale's notion of the "traveller" (1996, p. 4). At the end of each interview, informants were asked if there was anything they wished to add, or whether any particular topic was missing. The interviewees were thanked and debriefed in regards to the issues of anonymity and confidentiality, as well as promised access to the final results of the study.

3.2.6 Interview logistics

Depending on the speed of the Internet in both the researcher and interviewee locations, as well as the general quality of video-streaming and web cameras, observing non-verbal cues was sometimes a challenge. The positioning of the web camera also affects the video frame, thus a ''head shot'' provided by a webcam often creates obstacles in observing all of the participant's body language. One needs to be aware of these challenges and be able to adjust both equipment and verbal communication. Interestingly, being upfront with interviewees about possible technical problems and sometimes working with them on adjusting the camera or microphone provided some sense of joint experience. Acknowledging that most of the interviews went relatively smoothly and the amount of technical adjustment required was minimal, I was surprised that rather than negatively affecting the interview flow, these technical moments assisted in building rapport and provided a

welcome break and some moments to laugh together. Overall, the combination of verbal and nonverbal cues in the Skype interviews provided an authenticity level comparable to face-to-face interviews, in line with reports given by other researchers (Sullivan, 2012).

3.2.7 Pilots

Prior to setting up interviews for this study, a series of individual interviews and focus group pilots were conducted in summer 2012 and spring 2013 for the IOE EdD (International) course-work and Institution-Focused Study (IFS) purposes. In total, eight individual and three focus group interviews were conducted with both senior experienced staff and beginners in alumni relations. While none of the pilots were used to provide data for this study, this pilot testing allowed me to examine both the quality and the effectiveness of the interview questions, including the sequencing and wording of questions, the utilisation of probing and follow up questions, as well as the time required to elicit the desired information (Berg, 2009). The pilot experience, including gaining access to research participants and gaining their consent to be interviewed, assisted in polishing the main interview topics and provided a useful opportunity to refine my interview skills.

While the interview guide was piloted, as described above, the utilisation of Skype, as an online mode of interview conduct for this study, required continuous reflection throughout the data collection phase in order to constantly inform and refine the research process (Arksey and Knight, 1999). Importantly, due to the online mode of interviews and the geographically dispersed pool of interviewees, predominantly

consisting of one alumni relations practitioner per participating institution, focus group was not considered an appropriate method of data collection.

3.3 Data Processing and Analysis

Focused data processing and analysis were started by listening to sixteen interviews, cross-checking interview memos and making additional notes, as necessary. Then, the digital audio files were transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word. Similarly to a “data analysis spiral” (Creswell, 1998, p. 143), this process started well before the last interview was conducted and continued throughout the data interpretation and drafting process.

Factual individual profiles based on the short bio forms and individual accounts were prepared, along with handwritten individual interview summary notes. The factual data included age, gender, educational and professional background, job title, location (within the institution) and career path. In addition, summaries of the key features of the thirteen institutions involved in the study were developed (see Table 3 above) to provide contextual data to enrich the process of data analysis and coding. The individual interview summary notes were handwritten on the first page of each interview transcript, briefly covering the most vocal issues raised by individual research participants. In addition to colour coding the interview text, these summary notes assisted in linking individual accounts with codes and themes further developed.

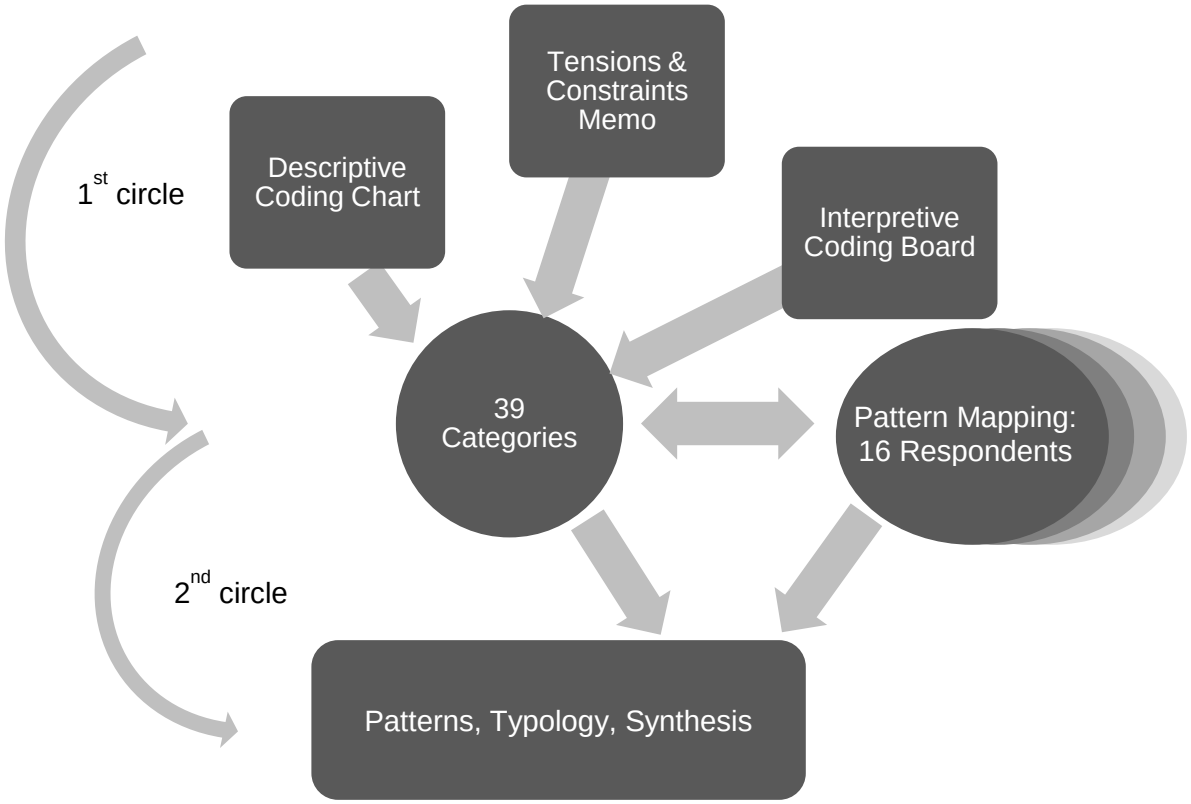
To proceed from the raw data to a conceptual level of data display, a decision was made to use “manual” coding to be able to “organise, manage, and retrieve the most meaningful bits” of data (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p. 26). Taking into account the semi-structured nature of the interviews and the relatively small number of research participants, a simple colour marking technique was used to make initial coding capture the richness of the raw data. As part of the EdD programme curriculum, Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) NVivo training had been received. However, for the purposes of this study, it was felt that the nature of the data produced and its moderate volume could be effectively managed through methods of more “manual” analysis. Retaining as much context as possible was also considered of significant value, thus manual data coding and analysis appeared to provide an epistemological fit for this research. While utilisation of CAQDAS is becoming more popular with researchers, the debate about the advantages and disadvantages of this software is still ongoing. Indeed, Atherton and Elsmore (2007) suggest that CAQDAS may not be applicable to some qualitative research. Accordingly, each researcher must reflect and decide on use or non-use, and utilise the method which appears to be the most efficient and matching the nature of the research.

3.3.1 Coding

As Gibbs points out, coding defines data analysis and involves “text or other data items” which are linked and “exemplify the same theoretical or descriptive idea” (2008, p. 38). Among the variety of coding methods, *descriptive, interpretive* and *pattern* (Miles and Huberman, 1994, pp. 57-58), as well as *structural* coding (Namey

et al., 2008) are considered for this study. Recognising that “coding is not a precise science”, but “primarily an interpretive act” within “the transitional process between data collection and more extensive data analysis” (Saldana, 2012, p. 4), I decided to utilise the above coding techniques through a customised data analysis process (see below Figure 8), inspired by Saldaña’s “codes-to-theory” two-cycle model (2012, p. 12).

Figure 8: Customised Data Analysis Process



Such data analysis process allowed for "semantic" (explicit) and "latent" (implicit) topics to be identified (Clarke and Braun, 2013; Creswell, 1998; Miles and Huberman, 1994). *Descriptive* coding was used for a chart consisting of 184 preliminary codes (Appendix 5) to cover the data’s main dimensions and develop a

core vocabulary for further analysis. *Interpretive* coding was utilised to catch, among others, implicit issues and gaps between structures, processes and individual understandings (Appendix 6). Serving as a "labelling and indexing device" (Namey et al., 2008, p. 141), *structural* coding further facilitated the initial categorisation of the data set consisting of 39 categories grouped under three broad themes: Institutional Setting and External Environment; Career Trajectory and Professional Identity Manifestation (see Table 4). Importantly, individual respondent's code occurrences and patterns of responses, identified via Pattern Mapping (Appendix 7) on "the basis of the number of individual participants who mention a particular theme" helped recognise rarely occurring or common "themes, ideas, or domains" (Namey et al., 2008, p. 143) and discuss them throughout Chapters 4 and 5. Pattern Mapping is based on Microsoft Excel "[c]onceptually clustered table where the columns are arranged to bring together items 'belonging together'" (Robson, 2011, p. 485), allowing for cross-institution and cross-respondent analysis, which led to the discovery of patterns through further *pattern* coding.

Table 4: Main themes and categories

Career Trajectory	
Gender of interviewee	Starting alumni relations operation from scratch?
Age of interviewee	How the interviewee got this job
Graduate of the school-employer (disregarding timing)	Formal training and initial professional affiliation, prior to alumni relations
Position of interviewee (formal title)	Professional training and development
Number of years in higher education	Benchmarking and assessment
Number of years in alumni relations	Critical incidents

Professional Identity Manifestation	
"I am …" or "what I do for life" statement	Professional challenges and tensions
Motivation for doing this job and special features	Individual career plans
Is alumni relations a profession?	Vision of alumni relations future in higher education
Is an AR job different from others?	Traits and skills important for alumni relations staff
Context: Institutional Setting and External Environment	
How does society perceive alumni relations?	Is there a dedicated alumni office?
How do graduates perceive alumni relations?	Units of closest collaboration
How is the AR area perceived internally?	Age of alumni function
Type of institution: private/state	Physical location of alumni office
Founding date/age of institution	Staff numbers dealing with alumni function
Student enrolment & alumni constituent numbers	Alumni relations staff needs
International students & international alumni ratio	Operational budget needs
Degree levels	Direct supervisor
Institutional academic profile	Role of leadership & level of support
Mission and focus of alumni operation	

Based on the conclusions emerging from the data analysed through the above coding frameworks, *pattern* codes, for instance, helped to construct themes evolving from the comparative analysis of the ways in which respondents can be active agents in developing their roles, interacting with stakeholders and constructing their professional identities. Following Gibbs' suggestion to pay special attention to points of tensions, dissonance, uncertainty or constraints (2008, pp. 47–48), a dedicated

Tensions & Constraints Memo (Appendix 8) became part of the data analysis process described above, serving both as an analytical memo and a checklist, to make sure that no significant issue of concern to respondents is missing from the final analysis.

The data flagging items listed below (adapted from Ryan and Bernard, 2003, pp. 89-99) helped to facilitate the data movement within different phases of the above described coding and data analysis process (Figure 8):

- repetitions;
- metaphors;
- transitions (in the flow of interviews or their content);
- comparisons;
- linguistic cues;
- links to existing theory and literature.

As far as links to the existing literature are concerned, Whitchurch's framework of professional identity, centred around space, knowledges, relationships and legitimacies (2013, 2008, 2006), as well as Gouldner's construct of "cosmopolitans and locals," linked to attitudes, values and perceptions (1958, 1957), helped contextualise and develop some topics for the interview guide (Appendix 4), as well as shape emerging themes during the data analysis phase. All other links to the existing literature identified during coding and further data analysis are supplied with references throughout the following chapters, as appropriate.

3.4 Ethical Reflexivity

Mason cautions not to under-estimate “the reflexive challenge” posed by the researcher positioning within the research process:

“If you choose qualitative interviewing, you are highly likely to conceptualise yourself as *active* and *reflexive* in the process of data generation, and seek to examine this rather than aspiring to be a neutral data collector.”

(2002, p. 66)

The dynamic between my professional experiences and occupational identities is linked to this research project. This link is primarily based on an interest in studying professional identities in the first place, but also on the way in which the interview guide was developed to see if my experiences related to those of others. As this project originated from my own professional life, the research participants were fellow professionals. Some of them knew my name from conferences or extended professional networks, though I had not had a direct working relationship with any of the interviewees or their institutions. My positioning within the alumni relations professional network as a frequent conference speaker and former chair of the International Alumni Relations (INTAL) Expert Community of the EAIE helped me gain access to respondents willing to share their thoughts. While I was aware of the potential influence this might have on the respondents and my own engagement in this study, being a fellow alumni relations practitioner helped me build a rapport and mutual understanding among “sense-makers and knowers” (Scott and Usher, 1999, p. 27), without imposing a particular point of view.

The process of reflection, however, does not come without its problems. One of its criticisms, stemming from the general epistemological concerns about qualitative research, points to the “political nature of social research - a human construction, framed and presented within a particular set of discourses (and sometimes ideologies) and conducted in a social context with certain sorts of social arrangements, involving especially funding, cognitive authority and power” (Punch, 1998, pp. 139-140). Frequently, authors and participants of studies are staff members of their institutions who, depending on their seniority, might be providing the “official position” or a “perspective reflecting their position and interests within the institution” (Brennan and Shah, 2000, p. 3). Accordingly, I made efforts to avoid or mitigate issues related to overexposure of institutional interests, as well as authority and power relationships, which could affect the research project. Indeed, reflexivity is a prolonged process, where some influences are more easily identifiable than others, and are often time-sensitive (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). Thus, I have strived to achieve a continued understanding of the complex relationship I as a researcher-practitioner have with my own research.

Subsequently, the exploratory focus of this study and the value-neutral, non-hierarchical nature of the research questions, which were not very personal, intimate or provocative, provided satisfactory grounds for conducting the study. While being part of the same professional network was of some concern from the point of view of the researcher’s over-identification with respondents, the culture of professional exchange and discussion, as well as the multi-institutional and transnational nature of this research project provided adequate distance between myself and respondents, as well as space for me to be aware of my dual identity as a fellow

professional and researcher. This dual positioning, however, had to be managed in a careful manner, so that any pre- or post-interview communication and information exchange would not lead to forming assumptions about my views of the research topic or creating unrealistic expectations in regards to the immediate implications of the study for the respondents' professional practice. Indeed, on many occasions research participants expressed their interest in discussing professionally relevant topics outside the research project framework. Thus, most of the time the challenge was not to build a rapport or have a deep productive discussion, but rather to appropriately end the interview and not to create unrealistic expectations in regards to the issues which did not directly relate to my role as a researcher or this research project, as a whole.

As part of the Institute of Education Ethics Review Procedure (Appendix 9) and voluntary informed consent (BERA, 2011), participants were asked about their interest in participating in the study and were briefed about the nature of the research (Appendix 10). They had the right to decline to collaborate at any stage. While no full confidentiality was promised, due to the relatively small pool of respondents, all the participating institutions and selected interview quotes used in the research report are anonymous. Moreover, respondents were informed that all audio recordings of the interviews would be destroyed within three years of the interviews.

3.5 Conclusion

Chapter 3 has offered an overview of my methodological approach, based on the utilisation of qualitative interviews as my primary method of data collection. It has covered particular characteristics of Skype interviewing and has provided further details of its applicability for qualitative research. Also, it includes a detailed account of my sampling procedure, as well as data collection and setting up the analytical framework. Finally, this chapter has dealt with ethical considerations and issues of credibility, paving the way for a discussion of the research findings in the following chapter.

Chapter 4 – FINDINGS

Following the above analytical framework, Chapter 4 offers an in-depth exploration of the 16 participant interviews. Where possible, respondents are briefly introduced. At the same time, for space limitations and the reader's convenience, Appendix 2 features a table with individual respondents' snapshots, focusing on their career highlights and institutional context, while respecting their anonymity. Examining the rich narrative material of the interviews through the 39 codes identified in the first-circle of coding provides the necessary environment for developing three clusters of codes discussed in the current chapter. For each cluster described (*professional identity manifestation, institutional setting and external environment, carer trajectory*), a brief overview of quantitative data has been produced to depict the variety of responses and their distribution within the interview pool. Then, a detailed description of qualitative data is integrated with illustrative quotations, aiding a nuanced understanding of each topic under discussion. Importantly, Chapter 4 is primarily focused on the descriptive and exploratory elements of the study. A further synthesis of the data, including suggested models and variables, can be found in Chapter 5, which includes some quotation-based illustrative materials, and is focused on the analysis of models and variables affecting the AR professional identity construction.

4.1 Professional Identity Manifestation

Starting with the examination of the data within the Professional Identity Manifestation theme was considered to be appropriate and well situated vis-à-vis the

other two data clusters. As described in Chapter 3, I was looking for codes and any textual pointers which would reflect on the research participants' professional commitments, principles, philosophies, interests, standards, values, future goals and aspirations (Beijaard et al., 2004; Canrinus et al., 2012). These items, forming a broad and inclusive view of professional identity, provide the basis for the first theme, which explores the way individual research participants display their professional identity. This theme includes eight topics, discussed in detail on the following pages and represented in Table 5.

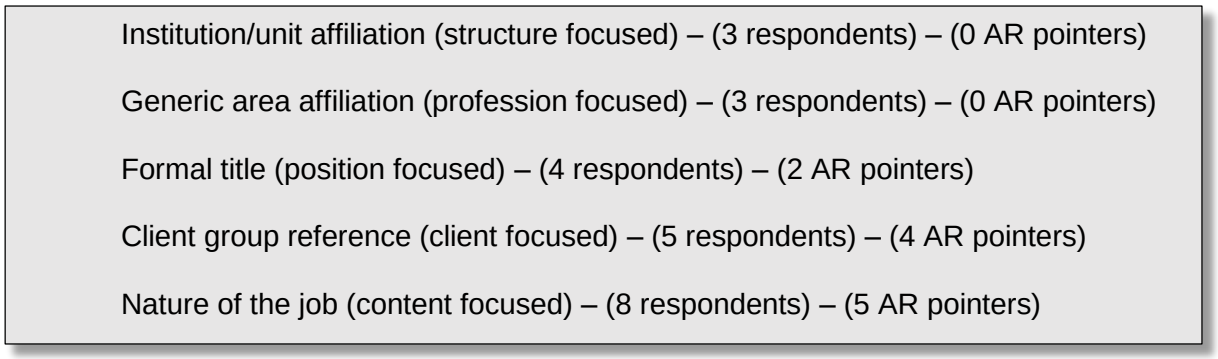
Table 5: Professional identity manifestation

"I am …" or "what I do for life" statement	Professional challenges and tensions
Motivation for doing this job and special features	Individual career plans
Is alumni relations a profession?	Vision of alumni relations' future in higher education
Is an AR job different from others?	Traits and skills important for alumni relations staff

4.1.1 The "I am …" or "what I do for life" statement

When asked to describe in a few sentences to someone not familiar with their professional activity what they do for a living, respondents took several approaches. These can be summarised by grouping the answers into five broad categories, according to the way research participants were describing themselves and the focus of those descriptions. Some responses included multiple focused descriptions. Importantly, some answers included word "alumni," called "AR pointer," and some did not (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Individual professional affiliation statements (more than one answer per respondent permitted)



Surprisingly, some of the statements collected appear to be coming from practitioners who were passionate about a variety of different areas, but not necessarily about alumni relations. Indeed, Elliot, an experienced higher education manager, based in a small private school and overseeing alumni relations projects, shares his passion for working with young people and teaching, without reflecting on alumni relations:

> "I work with young people. I always say that, because I have always wanted to be a teacher. I know I am not a teacher, but my colleagues tell me that I act like one."
>
> (Elliott)

Interestingly, responses which were primarily focused on *structure, profession* or *client* and did not include the word "alumni" correlate with the accounts of those who did not appear to have a pronounced AR professional identity (see Chapter 5), like

Janet, an MBA graduate and fundraising practitioner working for a young specialised state-run institution.

> “The joke is that I am a professional beggar (laughs). Speaking seriously, I’m asking good people for good money and manage it nicely. So, I am more like a fundraiser.”
>
> (Janet)

Turning to the density of the narrative material collected, the level of complexity of responses was more indicative of the level of seniority and/or overall project portfolio, rather than a hint at a strong AR professional identity. The next respondent, a senior marketing practitioner at a big traditional state university, gave a combination of *profession, content*, *position* and *structure* focused statements, without any reference to alumni:

> “I work in a marketing office and manage people. I go to events and organise events, I make phone calls and write hundreds of emails a day. Putting this simplistic description aside, I would usually say that I am a marketing manager or marketing professional.”
>
> (Isabelle)

At the same time, the apparently less complex *position*-focused statement below, with an alumni reference, belongs to a seasoned practitioner with experience in marketing, from a traditional state university, who is later identified as having a strong AR professional identity.

> “Probably, I would say that I am an alumni manager.”
>
> (Chris)

Analysing the types of responses received from the research participants, it appears that the biggest proportion of respondents identified as having a strong AR professional identity used multiple focused descriptions (combination of *content, client, position* and/or *profession focused*), which includes at least one reference to alumni. A good example of the latter comes from Alexandra, an experienced business marketer from a small private college, who effectively deploys marketing tools to achieve their alumni relations goals. In one sentence below, she shares the essence of her understanding of her key professional affiliation, covering not only the main *stakeholders* and the *content* of the job, but also its mission (on the mission and vision for alumni relations, see Sections 4.1.7 and 4.2.5, respectively).

> “I am a professional who helps alumni to keep in touch with their university and nurtures this relationship in order to build a better future for the university and its current students.”
>
> (Alexandra)

As noted above, and applicable to all respondents in this study, more complex responses about professional affiliation were coming from more senior managers and/or those with more extensive professional portfolios. The next research participants based in different countries and coming from private institutions of a similar size and age, have diverse professional and academic backgrounds and serve in senior management positions in their respective institutions. They blended

their *content*, *position* and/or *client* focused statements with the AR pointer and later were identified as having strong AR professional identity characteristics:

> "I deal with the organisation of the educational process, [as] pro-rector for academic affairs, and work with students and alumni."
>
> (Leila)

> "I am head of the alumni association of my university ... and we are building and developing connections among alumni and between alumni and university, and alumni and students."
>
> (Marie)

4.1.2 What do you like about your job? What motivates you or makes it special?

As discussed in Chapter 2, as part of professional the identity construct, individual motives and values affect "work-related behaviour and […] determine its form, direction, intensity and duration" (Latham and Pinder, 2005, p. 486). When asked about aspects of their job that motivate them the most, research participants' responses appeared to relate to motivation factors, which can be grouped around three main clusters. The first group includes what can be called the *self-centred/personality-linked* motivational factors, which primarily describe how respondents perceive some features of the AR job as matching their individual character, skills and talents, stressing the experience of a high level of personal satisfaction. Another cluster of AR job motivation factors relate to *serving others/mission-linked* aspects. This group of AR professionals indicate that their job

motivation is mainly coming from the perceived level of the importance, value and community impact of their jobs, often linked to some form of professional and/or institutional missions. Lastly, some respondents appear to be most enthusiastic about their work place, rather than the type of the work they do. This cluster, which contains so-called *work place/space-linked* categories, includes those research participants who find their strongest work motivation, similarly to Gouldner's "locals" (1958), in loyalty to and affiliation with their employer and/or the higher education sector in general.

Figure 10: Main job motivation factors (more than one answer per respondent permitted)

"My job tasks fit well my personality, that's what I like doing" *(self-centred/personality-linked*). Descriptions used by respondents: "creative," "challenging," "feels good," "no boundaries," "pleasant," "can do anything"/ 11 (69%)

"My professional role is important and mission driven" (*serving others/mission-linked*). Descriptions used by respondents: "adding value," "worth doing," "important thing," "has influence," "helping students and alumni" / 5 (31%)

"I am part of a nice work environment" (*work place/space-linked*). Descriptions used by respondents: "great to be at university," "a special place to be" / 3 (19%)

The respondent below is enthusiastic about a specific part of her job, which she likes the most. Whether it is because it is new for her, or associated with things she likes to experience and fit her personality, their combination appears to indicate more a personality-linked motivation category:

> “What I find exciting and lovely is our magazine, I really enjoy that. I haven’t done anything like this before. I like it when we do these interactive things, and smiling alumni come into our office, and we talk about how they feel about the university. The more challenging projects are the database, newsletters and the website.”
>
> (Isabelle)

The following two research participants are primarily motivated by being able to use their creativity and drive to be challenged and act in a variety of ways, which appears to be matching the personality-linked motivation category:

> “My profession is quite creative, it doesn’t have very strict boundaries. So when I come up with an idea, whether it is an event, social media project or… I don’t know … some kind of a game, then I can do it.”
>
> (Daisy)

> “[T]here is so much to develop. You have no time to be bored. I am not a workaholic, but I like to be challenged every day. This is why I like [alumni relations] more than academic or finance [units] because here you get many different things to do.”
>
> (Elliott)

Similarly to the above respondents, the following individual appears to be primarily motivated by the variety of tasks associated with her work. Interestingly, making a comparison with the business sector remuneration and jokingly referring to those

who work in universities “out of love” may indicate a lack of strong financial motivation, as well as hint at the somewhat lower status of administrative jobs in higher education:

> “Compared to the business sector, the salary here is much lower. People who work in universities do it out of love (laughs). […] I like this job, it has different tasks – some are administrative, some are outside of the office. I like the constant variety.”
>
> (Holly)

A somewhat different tone and reference to both pay and value-added difference in business and universities is shared by the research participant below. His focus on adding value to the community by doing alumni relations work appears to be an important indicator of the mission-linked job motivation focused on service to others and conceivably linked to a pronounced AR professional identity:

> “[Being able] to add value to this community is what keeps me going. Before [the AR job], I made more money, but I considered that to be less valuable than what I do [in alumni relations] now. It was profit making [focused] and the world was not a better place with the work that I was doing [in the business sector].”
>
> (Hugo)

Continuing the exploration of the “value to the community” factor, the respondent below adds both an individual emotional component and a perceived focus on the uniqueness of the job she is doing:

> “It feels good that you can influence things through projects. You bring value to the community. It sometimes feels like jumping into hot and cold water. It’s the kind of feeling that you can do something that not so many people are doing.”
>
> (Janet)

Enjoying the job, learning it quickly and finding it worth doing is a combination of personality-linked and mission-linked motivation factors:

> “This is a very pleasant job. I enjoy it a lot and I think I got into it very quickly. Also, it actually feels like something worth doing for others.”
>
> (Alexandra)

Work mission, focused on the concept of giving rather than just receiving, as well as serving others (the main stakeholders, like students and alumni) has a powerful appeal for the respondent below. While her job tasks appear to match her personality, her main motivation comes from the results of what she does and how these results benefit her clients:

> “For me, students and alumni are the main reasons why I am doing this job. When I see their success and kind of push their get from the university, for

them to fly ... I am happy. The more you give, the more you receive [...]. I enjoy my work and believe others benefit from what I do."

(Leila)

A possible link of professional identity to internal satisfaction with the selected career and societal recognition (Remley and Herlihy, 2001), as well as a correlation of personal satisfaction with the nature of the job and its mission-driven impact perception component, appear to be two main reasons that motivate AR specialists participating in this study. Having both personality and mission-linked motivation strongly correlates with the mid to long-term time commitment to alumni relations and is linked to a pronounced AR professional identity (Section 5.1.1). Indeed, both respondents, who shared personality- and mission-linked motivation characteristics, are identified as strong AR professional identity holders. Perhaps, more importantly, mission-linked motivation appears to correlate with perceiving alumni relations as a profession and a strong AR professional identity. Four out of five respondents with a pronounced professional identity have mission-linked AR job motivation. At the same time, all the respondents with workplace-linked motivation in this study reported their intention to leave the AR job within a few years and, not surprisingly, were not identified as having a strong AR professional identity.

4.1.3 Is alumni relations different from other areas? Is alumni relations a profession?

As discussed above, one of the prerequisites and core characteristics of professional identity is a belief in the very existence of this distinct and unique professional field. The following two questions are seen as playing an important role

in this study devoted to professional identity construct. Firstly, respondents were asked whether they consider their job and what they do as being different in some way from what others do in higher education and beyond (Figure 11). Then, irrespective of their answer, research participants were asked whether they consider alumni relations to be a profession (Figure 12).

Figure 11: Uniqueness of alumni relations work

Most research participants, i.e. ten respondents (63%), were not certain about how different their AR jobs were from other areas. Four respondents (25%) believed that they were in some ways different from other professionals. Two respondents (12%) did not see much difference between the type of things they were doing in the alumni office and in their previous jobs.

> "When I compare [AR] with public relations, where I had some experience, I do not see very different concepts [...]. There are a lot of similarities with alumni relations in how things are promoted, in event organising, so it was not difficult to translate [my previous] experience to alumni relations."
>
> (Kevin)

> "I think there is a common thing in my previous job and in the present one, namely that we deal with customers."
>
> (Grace)

Interestingly, understanding how one's profession is different from others may require either previous experience to compare with or solid professional training and

knowledge, which defines some important unique characteristics of the profession. With the reported lack of extensive AR professional training in Central and Eastern Europe, it appears that most respondents were not entirely sure about the unique characteristics of the AR area. Indeed, even those four (25 %) respondents who claimed to be doing unique things different from others, were primarily sharing their individual feelings and experiences, and not necessarily different types of projects or unique AR tools. Such descriptions as being more "free," "creative and flexible," as well as the "diversity" of tasks have been part of their understanding of alumni relations' uniqueness as a professional area. Perhaps only one respondent took it further, by identifying one of alumni relations' possible features related to its long-term focus:

> "Alumni relations people have some characteristic traits which are more like mission based. [AR specialists] want to achieve something through [mission]: help other people, help education, and make society better […]. We are mission people with a long-term view. Surgeons, for example, cause pain at first; they have to make a cut to start an operation to save a patient. Similarly to them and different from other well-established professions, like mostly process-based finance professionals, we are focused more on long-term results and mission."
>
> (Janet)

It appears that there is no significant correlation between how respondents felt about the uniqueness of their professional portfolio and whether they believed alumni relations was a profession. Indeed, all those four (25 %) respondents who reported

they felt they were different from others did not think that alumni relations was a profession. At the same time, the way respondents answered the question: “Is alumni relations a profession?” can be considered as one of the important elements of a pronounced AR professional identity. Indeed, as introduced in Chapter 2, the very basis of professional identity is a belief that a given profession, different from others, exists and has a unique set of values, which are shared by those who strive to belong to it. Figure 12 is based on the responses of research participants and show the four main groups of answers to the question: “Is alumni relations a profession?”

Figure 12: Is alumni relations a profession?

Five respondents (31%) feel that AR certainly is a distinct professional area, while three (19%) feel that it is definitely not. Two (13%) believe that it probably is, and six research participants (37%) believe that AR is probably not a profession.

As can be seen in Figure 12, a surprisingly low proportion of AR practitioners in this study considered alumni relations to be a distinct professional area. It should be noted that the context of AR as an evolving professional area in the CEE region and associated with this weak knowledge base and lack of extensive professional training, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, can partially account for this situation. Indeed, even within the wider higher education community, alumni relations and other evolving professional areas can be seen as sub-professions within the “profession” of either institutional advancement/development or the broader university administration. The possible ambiguity of new spaces of expertise created

under the broader umbrella of professions may illustrate and acknowledge the contemporary fluidity of the general concept of being a professional. Recognising this contextual ambiguity, however, the question about perceiving AR as a distinct professional area, together with the way respondents replied to it, helped to zoom in the professional identity construction process and highlighted professional loyalty and commitment. Indeed, some AR staff affiliate themselves more with other evolving professional areas, for instance marketing or fundraising, or with broader "higher education professionals" dealing with education management and administration. Chapter 5 will discuss the particular categories of "specialists" and "residents," applicable to some research participants and resembling Gouldner's "cosmopolitans" and "locals" (Gouldner, 1958, 1957).

Similarly to the following respondent, the highest proportion of research participants were either not certain about the alumni relation professional status or thought that it was not a profession:

> "I think [alumni relations] is quite a vague area, because people deal with alumni firstly in the careers department, then in the international relations department, and so on. Some people do it part-time, some full-time, it's not a professional title."
>
> (Daisy)

Importantly, all five respondents who were certain that alumni relations is a profession have been identified as having a strong AR identity (Chapter 5):

"I think it is a profession and it is an important profession, [which has] a lot of value for the community."

(Hugo)

4.1.4 Traits and skills important for alumni relations staff

Figure 13: Set of skills for the alumni relations practitioner

When asked about the most valuable skill or quality for an AR specialist, the majority of respondents – eleven people (69%) considered communication skills as the most important. Five other research participants (31%) selected one of the following: "creative"; "energetic"; "people skills"; "project management" skills; "seeing big picture."

The dominant position of communications skills can be attributed to communications, marketing and PR being one of the most frequent professional and/or educational backgrounds among these study participants (see Section 4.3.5). Another possible angle is close collaboration of alumni relations and communications/PR within participating institutions (see Figure 25). As one of the most important activities for AR specialists, communicating with alumni is probably a function often delegated to communications and PR specialists in both integrated AR-PR and independent AR functional models.

"Nowadays everything is about communication and [AR professionals] definitely have to be good at it."

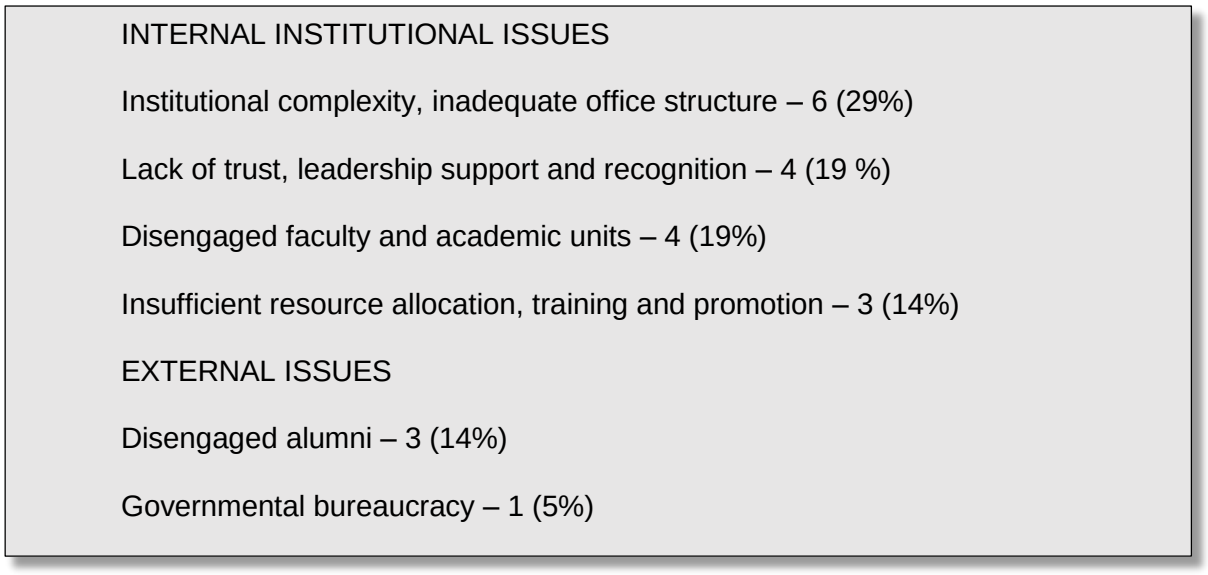
(Hugo)

> “Most of the time, it’s a project based job and you have to see not only the ‘here and now’, but you have to see the future. And of course, people skills and communication skills are really needed. I don’t have many subordinates, but there are many volunteers, who have to be convinced to get involved. This is communication, starting from a direct email to a personal meeting.”
>
> (Janet)

4.1.5 Professional challenges, tensions and concerns

Semi-structured interviews provided some flexibility to tackle a variety of issues originally included in the interview topic list and those that respondents raised in the interview. One way to stimulate the interview flow was to ask at some point about any issues, problems or tensions the respondents experienced in their work life. While primarily trying to open up new topics not yet discussed, this interview section produced some nuanced information, which is categorised in Figure 14. Interestingly, most issues and concerns reported are related to internal institutional dynamics, and not so much to the external environment and stakeholders. The highest proportion of the issues below have surfaced through other topics, connecting and sometimes reinforcing particular factors, for instance, the role of institutional context and, in particular, leadership (Chapter 5), which appears to play an important role in the professional identity construction of this study’s participants.

Figure 14: Work related challenges, tensions and concerns (21 responses were taken as the 100% total base)



As discussed above (Chapter 2), the institutional complexity of universities with their shifting structures continues to be a challenging environment for many higher education practitioners. Likewise, the study participants voiced their biggest concerns over issues related to internal structures and institutional complexity:

> "We are so big that we have this problem of unity at the university. Each faculty has their own identity and their own dean. We are trying all the time to raise this sense of unity, a shared feeling towards the university among faculty and alumni."
>
> (Beatrice)

In addition to concerns over structural complexity and bureaucratic procedures, the relationship with faculty and academic departments remains one of the most sensitive and frequently reported issues, shared by this study's participants:

> "It is getting through to the academic staff to understand that there [are] benefits for both sides to work together. [T]hey just can't imagine that this can happen. I wish I had the courage to do more in this area."
>
> (Janet)

> "We have ten faculties. Each faculty has an alumni coordinator and I have ten different relationships with them. If you ask me as the central alumni officer, I don't mind if all faculties do their own alumni programmes, but we need to coordinate."
>
> (Isabelle)

Research participants frequently cited lack of trust, credibility and legitimacy, often associated with a perceived insignificance of alumni relations' institutional value and insufficient leadership support:

> "You have to prove yourself all the time. I had to defend every project that comes to my mind. I feel that I have to fight for my projects and my beliefs. The main reason is that we don't have a tradition of alumni work. But after, say, a decade, I think alumni relations will become a very normal part of the university culture."
>
> (Daisy)

The following paragraph summarises well the most acute tensions shared by participants of this study. Issues of leadership and institutional stability, inadequacy of administrative structures and processes, lack of professional development opportunities are among them:

> "I am trained by myself, but would like to do some proper AR training. Also, it would be good to promote our work within the university, so that others could see what we are doing. Importantly, [we need] to collaborate better with the career office because we are only [integrated] in our name, as the career and alumni office. [Lastly], constant institutional reorganisation and change of leadership make our daily work hard."
>
> (Holly)

An interesting topic related to the institutional context and the way AR practitioners position themselves vis-à-vis their employers and main stakeholders appear to be a factor which "stretches" the professional identities (Hill, 2007) of the two respondents below:

> "There is some tension between the status of a university employee and serving the interests of alumni. To deal with this tension, I think about my internal beliefs and the stated values of our university: honesty; professionalism; mutual respect and responsibility. Of course, sometimes it's a question of [institutional] priorities."
>
> (Leila)

> “One of the biggest issues for me remains the separation of my personal name from the office brand. There is a very strong link between me and the work. I strive for the alumni association to be considered as an entity based on certain principles, instead of being perceived as a one-person shop. On the one hand, I enjoy being recognised as the founder and the engine of the association. On the other hand, I would like people to support the very idea of the alumni network, and value it, irrespective of who does the job.”
>
> (Marie)

The above issues appear to primarily relate to the institutional context and career trajectory and are linked to the so-called, identity “split” or “stretch,” shared by respondents as common characteristics shaping the AR professional identity construction (Chapter 5). Bridging to the next section, we can see how respondents reflect on these issues as they talk about their vision for the future of alumni relations in higher education.

4.1.6 Future individual career plans (*stay, conditional stay* or *leave*)

Linked to the theme of a vision for the future of alumni relations discussed below (Section 4.1.7), as well as respondents’ job motivation (Section 4.1.2) and other Professional Identity Manifestation themed items, future professional goals and aspirations can be seen as important elements of the professional identity construct (Beijaard et al., 2004; Canrinus et al., 2012).

Figure 15: Individual career plans

While three respondents (19%) are most *likely to leave* their alumni relations job within one or two years for private or professional reasons, all of them would like to stay within higher education. Six research participants (38%) *intend to stay* with alumni relations long-term, and at the time of our interview, did not have any plan to move. Seven respondents (44%) are planning to *conditionally stay* with their current employer doing alumni relations for the next two or three years.

The main prerequisites to stay in the AR field for a significant number of the respondents are promotion prospects and/or opportunities to continue their studies. The next research participant, for example, pinpoints an issue shared with some of those respondents who plan to conditionally stay or leave their AR positions. Indeed, in the context of many CEE countries, relatively low salaries in the higher education sector and the high level of the volatility of the national economies undermine institutional efforts to provide financial incentives to AR professionals that appear mobile and able to apply their professional skills elsewhere:

> "For me, the alumni relations area is still interesting. But these types of jobs are not very well paid here, and the initial motivation to do something new and challenging is turning into frustration due to a lack of recognition and promotion opportunities. With time spent in this field, my motivation is getting blurry and incentives are losing their appeal due to inflation. You know what I mean (laughs)."
>
> (Kevin)

Interestingly, when asked where they would move if they had to, the respondents indicated the business sector as a potential destination. In this respect, the business sector's popularity with AR specialists can be linked to their previous career or educational experience related to the business sphere. Moreover, the perception that the business sector offers more career growth and professional development opportunities may be a factor in their decision to leave higher education for the business sector. Additionally, moving to the business sector does not necessarily mean doing a completely different type of job. Not only do AR specialists possess transferable skills (Section 4.1.4), but also alumni relations appears to be a dynamically evolving professional area within the business sector (Cohen, 2016b) as well.

> "We have a small family company. I […] find it interesting to deal with a small company and not being part of this huge university. I don't mind working [for the university] and I like my job, but I am just a small fish in a big pond. Sometimes it is interesting to see what it would be like if it was the other way around, if I was a big fish in a small pond."
>
> (Isabelle)

> "We always have to have a plan A, and a plan B. I think plan A is to do what I currently do, but I must [professionally] grow. It's not interesting to do the same. It's not even [about] job hierarchy or salary. It is to grow and do new things as a professional. So, plan B is [to move to] business."
>
> (Janet)

The following research participant talks about a widely shared sentiment among this study's participants about career promotion and advancement opportunities as a precondition for staying in the field. At the same time, uniquely for this study, she also shares the concern over some perceived generation specific issues related to both alumni constituencies and alumni staff. While age and gender did not appear to play a significant role in the AR professional identity construct, it could probably be a topic for further investigation. The enquiry could relate to those professionals whose jobs require having a high level of empathy and age sensitivity, and a willingness to keep learning about generation specific ways to communicate and engage.

> "I am staying with my school long term if there is a chance for advancement. But if I am not promoted, I will have to think about my future plans. [Having said that], I would like to continue working in alumni relations until a relatively old age. I don't know how relevant [staff age] is for this profession, as we deal more with younger graduates. From this perspective, I don't know how someone much older would connect with younger people."
>
> (Alexandra)

The future career goals of the following two respondents are focused on the place of work and/or linked to private family related matters, with not much consideration given to alumni relations as a professional area of interest.

> "Well, I would like to have a baby. Also, I would like to work at a school or university. I think that [the university] is a good place for me, as I am studying

[part-time] educational management and obtaining special needs education. I'd like to work in that area, but I don't know when to start."

(Fiona)

"I don't know where I will be in five years' time. I like working in higher education. I have been here for 11 years, this is what I know best, but I would be happy to move to a different position. I see a lot of potential in corporate relations, so moving into a managerial position in corporate relations would be good."

(Felicity)

The following two research participants appear to be determined to continue their career path and see their future in alumni relations.

"I think [alumni relations] is a long term opportunity for me […]. I can see a future for me [in alumni relations]."

(Chris)

"I will be here in the next few years, because I can see my ideas coming to life. Not all of them, but if you are a reasonable person, with energy and good arguments, [institutional leadership] will let you do it. And that is very important."

(Elliott)

4.1.7 Vision for alumni relations' future in higher education

Linked to the above discussed future individual career plans and professional tensions and issues, participants' opinions about the AR field's future in higher education appear to be shaped by their professional maturity and job responsibilities related to long-term planning. Considering that many of the participants were junior and middle level practitioners, it is not surprising that many of them are not interested in and/or certain about the strategic direction and long-term future of alumni relations as a professional field.

Figure 16: View on alumni relations' future in higher education

Five respondents (31%) were not certain about the future direction of alumni relations in general and in their respective institutions, in particular. The difference between the following groups of opinions was more informative: one (6%) - *quite optimistic*; one (6%) - *quite pessimistic*; nine (56%) - *cautiously optimistic* about the future of alumni relations in higher education.

At the same time, some research participants were genuinely interested in a big picture view and shared what appears to be a positive outlook on the future of alumni relations, primarily focusing on their host university:

> "I like it where we are now. Now we [are about] to establish a [robust alumni] system that we can trust and that can work in the long run. After working on building relationships for a few years, I would definitely invest more in marketing and fundraising. We need to develop these two areas in order to

> obtain better acceptance from the university and show that [alumni relations] will work in the long run. It is a critical point now, but I am quite optimistic that it is going to work."
>
> (Hugo)

Notably, this respondent's sentiment about alumni relations reaching a critical point in the higher education sector of the CEE region is shared by the following AR practitioner. The main difference between the two, however, is in the tone and expectations related to this critical point. Indeed, in contrast to the former, mostly upbeat attitude, the respondent below appears to be more concerned, projecting a somewhat negative outlook for the alumni relations sector in his country:

> "On the one hand, alumni relations is a very interesting area, on the other, it does not appear to bring short-term return on investment, which many institutions were counting on. Thus, many schools reconsider their investment in alumni relations, mostly due to budget constraints. This may lead to a critical point in alumni relations, with a possible generation change and exodus among the first wave of experienced AR specialists. Some of them would be looking for different types of jobs, probably outside the higher education sector."
>
> (Kevin)

Another respondent paints a somewhat similar picture, full of obstacles for the AR area, at least in state higher education:

> “I would like to move away from my part-time [alumni relations] job. I think AR work is very important, but there should be a dedicated office. Unfortunately, I don’t think this will develop soon [in my university], because of the current governmental restriction on administrative staff hires at state universities. Also, I don’t see my university leadership showing much interest in alumni activities. There are just too many obstacles in doing alumni relations work.”
>
> (Beatrice)

Noting the above opinions, ranging from very positive to quite negative, the majority of research participants – 9 (56%) were cautiously optimistic, not so much sharing concerns, but rather talking about the necessary contextual conditions for alumni relations to develop further.

4.2 Context: Institutional Setting and External Environment

Guided by the categories identified in the data analysis (Table 6), this section covers some of the key structural issues related to the broader theme of institutional setting and external environment within which alumni relations practitioners operate. The topics, associated with the theme, are grouped and discussed below, based on their significance in relation to the professional identity of alumni relations staff and the richness of the interview narratives related to them.

Table 6: Institutional setting and external environment

How does society perceive alumni relations?	Is there a dedicated alumni office?
How do graduates perceive alumni relations?	Units of closest collaboration
How is the AR area perceived internally?	Age of alumni function
Type of institution: private/state	Physical location of alumni office
Founding date/age of institution	Staff numbers dealing with alumni function
Student enrolment & alumni constituent numbers	Alumni relations staff needs
International students & international alumni ratio	Operational budget needs
Degree levels	Direct supervisor
Institutional academic profile	Role of leadership & level of support
Mission and focus of alumni operation	

4.2.1 Alumni relations and society in the Central and Eastern European context

Discussed in the above Interview Sample section, the distribution of the institutions and countries in this study enables a comparative cross-country analysis. Indeed, covering thirteen institutions across eight countries offered a unique opportunity to see whether any country-specific issues could become palpable within the study material. While approximately 30% of participating institutions are in Hungary, and another 15% are from the Russian Federation, the institutions in these two as well as in six other countries share comparable, if not similar, types of issues related to alumni relations practitioners. With all due consideration for the country specific legal, social and economic environments discussed below, the host country in this study did not appear to be a significant factor in the AR professional identity construct. Indeed, all five research participants, identified as having a pronounced

AR professional identity, are from five different countries, which does not appear to reflect the way countries are represented in the study pool.

Figure 17: Society's perception of alumni relations

Eight respondents (50%) believe that alumni relations is neither very clear as a concept, nor is it an area attracting much public attention in their respective countries. Another eight respondents (50%) indicate that while alumni relations are not well understood by the majority of their fellow citizens, there is a sense that alumni are of growing importance and that the public is more aware of the professional work required to deal with former students.

While the above difference of opinion among respondents does not significantly diverge in assessing the relatively low level of understanding and acceptance of AR as an important professional field, half the respondents believe that the situation is slowly improving. The research participants' opinions appear to correlate with their home countries, rather than their professional profiles or the institutions they are from. In this respect, one could argue that while the geographic area of this study appears to be relatively homogenous in regards to the perception of alumni relations as a field within the wider societal context, there is some difference between the participating countries. All but one out of the eight respondents who reside in the same country indicate a low level of acceptance and lack of understanding within their society.

> "[T]here is a country difference. For example, when I went to Germany I felt that people who dealt with alumni were appreciated and seen as doing an

> important and difficult job. But in the […] post-Soviet countries, I think it is something that is considered unnecessary. It is very new and […] people are afraid of it, as there are so many other priorities."
>
> (Daisy)

The lack of alumni culture and history of alumni relations within a given society affects not only the external environment for newly established alumni offices, but also the alumni officers themselves. Indeed, as shown by the following excerpt from Hugo, neither him, nor his fellow AR staff have had their own alumni experience. They were not treated as "real alumni" by the schools they graduated from, the majority of which still do not have or have not had alumni programmes until recently.

> "Alumni relations is not exploited enough [in my country]. The majority does not understand the very concept. [We] made a [national] survey among AR officers. When we had a look at what [networks we are part of], not a single alumni group was included. If this applies to AR professionals, what can we expect from our fellow citizens?"
>
> (Hugo)

Having both the external challenge of lack of understanding from society and a lack of personal experience of being an alumnus/alumna makes the AR job a puzzling proposition in this part of the world. Being one of the few exceptions for this study, AR professional Alexandra, graduated from a UK university. Interestingly, she referred to her student and alumni experience as an "important factor" in her decision to apply for an AR position and be confident in her ability to do a good job.

Taking into consideration the rather weak state of the AR professional area in the CEE region, it may take generations for this part of the world to reach the level of alumni culture, philanthropy and volunteerism currently seen in the USA (Drezner, 2011; Koenig, 2016). Unfortunately, the current legislature, taxation and administrative procedures in CEE countries do not appear to provide for a thriving and dynamically evolving philanthropy and volunteerism. As Janet comments:

> "This is to do with the law, there are many things that you just cannot do as a university, or they are very complicated. If we look at it from the perspective of potential donors, the university is not the first thing you want to support in this country - it is usually children, animals or something else, but not a university."

Difficulties associated with the financial crisis and the overall strained economies of the CEE region made the work of alumni relations specialists even harder:

> "[Here], not many people understand [alumni relations]. Even two or three years ago it was something crazy to do alumni work at a university. And we had a very big [economic] crisis here. [Alumni relations] is really kind of not very popular – it is seen as something which 'eats' money [within the institution] and nothing else."
>
> (Janet)

> "Well, it was clear from the beginning that in the long run we'd have to generate money. We supposed that the money could come from industry, but

> that was the time when the economic crisis started […]. We have started collecting some donations, but are running into administrative difficulties. It's not just whether alumni […] are allowed [to donate as individuals], but whether the whole university is allowed [to accept such gifts]."
>
> (Hugo)

This frustration with uncertainty and the lack of a clear legislative and administrative base, as well as the wider societal support are shared by many respondents, especially those dealing with fundraising. On the one hand, universities, funding agencies and society as a whole expect some successes from initial investments into setting up alumni relations programmes. On the other hand, the very same society, its legislative framework and administrative bureaucracy make the work of the alumni practitioners, perhaps unintentionally, hard and challenging. Such circumstances put more pressure on AR professionals to develop multiple profiles for themselves, their work and their institutions within the context of unrealistic expectations, lack of adequate support and necessary administrative changes. While AR specialists strive to build a positive profile of the work of AR practitioners, the above trends appear to add to the frustration and identity "strain" of AR practitioners (Section 5.2).

Reliance on someone else, be it a state or some other national or supranational authorities, like the European Union, is another characteristic of the perception shared by many in the CEE countries:

> “Of course, it is very difficult because our alumni know that the university has some money from the state and the EU. It is hard to ask them for money […].”
>
> (Chris)

It is possible that some increase in the number of alumni programmes set up across the universities in Central and Eastern Europe is due to a variety of funding opportunities provided by the EU and other external funding sources. While acknowledging the importance of alumni work for a sustainable future for the higher education sector, most of these funds have been available for a limited duration, and are primarily targeted at the initial elements of alumni programming, for example, launching a database or website, hiring short-term staff or organising a major alumni event.

> “We are required to collect data about former students. It’s called the ‘Diplomás Pályakövető Rendszer’ (“Diplomások Pályakövetési Rendszere,” 2007), translated from Hungarian as “Graduate Career Path Monitoring System.” There is a dedicated person [outside of the alumni unit] who is managing it. Unfortunately, this data is not used much. What we have is not so much personal data, but rather some feedback about their university experience, and about how quickly [graduates get] jobs. This database was initially financed by an EU grant and the government. Now there is no more money, but there is an obligation to continue this project.”
>
> (Hugo)

> "[Then the] Rector went to the US and saw some alumni offices there, and brought back brochures. If American universities have these alumni offices, so should we. [Luckily], we could get an external grant for setting up an alumni [programme]."
>
> (Isabelle)

4.2.2 How alumni perceive alumni relations as a professional area

Figure 18: How do alumni perceive alumni relations?

Four respondents (25%) indicated that their alumni do not fully appreciate the value of alumni programmes, although this situation is improving. Nine respondents (56%) reported a moderate to high level of understanding and acceptance of the role of alumni relations among their alumni constituencies. Three respondents (19%) could not comment on this issue.

"The client is always right" in the world of business, but how alumni relations officers think their main clients – alumni – value their work? Most interviewees shared some anecdotal evidence of alumni feedback in regards to their programme efforts and the job they do. Many alumni, with the possible exception of international students, who come from abroad and leave the host country after graduation, would be exposed to opinions and beliefs widely shared within a given society. Due to the relatively small proportion of international students in the participating institutions, one may assume that the majority of alumni would share views similar to their fellow citizens' unenthusiastic perception of alumni relations. Indeed, a significant number of

respondents report that many alumni do not perceive higher education institutions worthy of their financial or non-financial support. However, this scepticism and lack of interest in supporting higher education in general and alumni relations, in particular, is just one element of a broader context.

Interestingly, AR practitioners who have been working with alumni for several years note that the early reaction of graduates towards initial alumni relations activities has changed from ignorance and lack of understanding of "what alumni relations is supposed to do" to a more informed reaction and decision-making on whether to get connected and involved. Thus, the early phases of the alumni programme perception have paved the way to a different type of challenge - making a case for involvement.

> "When I started my work [three years ago], I often met alumni and they were not aware even of the very existence of the alumni programme here. Recently I have not heard anyone saying that the alumni office does not do much. Of course, we also have cases when people are not interested in staying in touch at all, but these cases are quite rare."
>
> (Kevin)

> "Our students, usually twenty years old, do not know the concept of alumni relations. This is why we want to focus on students who are about to graduate. You know, the Hungarian expression "Öregdiák," literally translated from Hungarian as "old student," is not really popular with mature people, while young people start laughing when they hear it."
>
> (Isabelle)

While some schools segment alumni based on their age or professional affiliation, some institutions make a case for a focus on their international alumni:

> "[We] would like to expand [our programs] to our alumni internationally. We have to work more with [them], because they come from other cultures and can support the university more than [local] alumni."
>
> (Chris)

Indeed, some schools make a distinction between their local and international alumni, often based on a perceived difference between the two groups in terms of value of return on investment. International alumni are often seen as global brand ambassadors, affecting the number of potential fee paying international students. This is often used as an argument for the increased support of alumni relations, potentially helping to boost self-image and aid the professional identity of AR staff. At the same time, local alumni are more numerous, more accessible and often have influential positions at the local or national level. Prioritising alumni groups based on permanent residence can be a challenge, both in terms of strategy and office capacity, but also in terms of the concept of inclusive alumni relations. Many AR staff do not feel comfortable focusing on one alumni group, often at the expense of another. Indeed, if such a two-tier alumni programming is implemented without carefully considering all alumni constituent groups, this may possibly have a negative impact on the AR professional identity, adding to the identity strain of AR practitioners discussed below.

4.2.3 Internal institutional stakeholders' perception

Figure 19: What do they think about alumni relations?

Three respondents (19%) indicated that most of the academic and administrative staff within their institutions do not appreciate (*low appreciation* index) the value of alumni programmes and their work as AR practitioners. Thirteen respondents (81%) believe that their university colleagues appreciate to some extent (*moderate appreciation* index) the role of alumni relations and AR staff in the life of their institutions.

While considering alumni relations to be more of a support function, most institutional stakeholders appear to be prepared to learn more about alumni relations and accept its value:

> "I think we [alumni relations] do not have a very bad image internally, because [colleagues] can see our work. We have regular meetings with all faculties, so they know about me and our work, but they have their own problems […]."
>
> (Chris)

At the same time, the picture remains somewhat mixed, with some research participants sharing concerns about a lack of legitimacy, understanding and recognition within their respective institutions, which puts extra pressure on AR specialists and stretches their professional identity, by undermining their self-image and forcing them to constantly prove themselves:

> “We often invite faculty and other colleagues to alumni events. Unfortunately, not many are eager to get involved. There is a lack of institutional understanding of the importance of alumni relations.”
>
> (Kevin)

On the other hand, a more positive and supportive institutional environment for alumni relations correlates with a stronger AR professional identity. The next two respondents, who are identified as having a strong AR professional identity, share their views:

> “Our alumni relations activity is centralised. It’s accepted by different academic and administrative units, and we have a very supportive environment. We do everything together in the name of one common purpose.”
>
> (Alexandra)
>
> “Nowadays, staff and faculty across the board understand the importance of alumni programmes.”
>
> (Leila)

4.2.4 Institutional profile: private, young and specialised

Guided by the following sub-sections, describing a somewhat higher proportion of young, private and specialised schools, hosting AR staff with a strong AR professional identity, an assumption could be made about the possible correlation between professional identity construction and institutional age, academic profile, as

well as the legal and financial structure of hosting institutions. However, within the framework of this small-scale study with a limited number of respondents, such a link cannot be well established, but rather serves as a useful linkage to potentially more useful contextual variables affecting professional identity construction. These variables are institutional leadership support for an AR function and the institutional positioning of this function. These are explored in Sections 4.2.6 and 4.2.9, and further analysed in Chapter 5.

Type of institution: private/state

The initial pool of potentially participating institutions appeared to have a relatively high number of private educational institutions with alumni relations operations. However, to better reflect the realities of the CEE region's higher education landscape, the final pool of participating institutions included more state run universities (Figure 20).

Figure 20: Institutional types

The final pool of study participants included eight (62%) state and five (38%) private institutions, represented by ten (62%) and six (38%) alumni relations specialists, respectively.

While the biggest proportion of study participants considered the type of institution to be a simple factual item to be collected, with no significance for the conversation about professional identity, the respondent below clearly saw privately owned

institutions of higher education as being more flexible and innovative than state institutions:

> "I am working for a privately owned institution, which is somewhere between business and state higher education. [I] wouldn't like to work at a state university. I value so much that we, as a private university, can make fast decisions and implement new ideas."
>
> (Grace)

Another interesting observation was made by a respondent working for a state school. Chris referred to the fact that their alumni "know that [state] universities have […] money" from the government, which allegedly makes it more difficult to engage with alumni and to ask them to contribute than it is for a private school.

In Chapter 5, reflecting on the ratio of respondents identified as strong AR identity holders, we notice a higher proportion of private institutions represented in that group. Indeed, three respondents from private schools, and two from state ones have shown a strong AR professional identity. However, the picture is mixed and the "state vs. private" type of institution item does not appear to strongly correlate with the AR specialist professional identity construction. At the same time, the type of institutional ownership and the way it is governed may possibly contribute to the overall institutional culture, resources and leadership, with the latter being an important factor, affecting the AR professional identity (Sections 4.2.9 and 5.2.3). The limited literature on CEE private higher education introduced in Chapter 1 could provide some cues about attempts to legitimise and financially strengthen private

higher education, possibly by investing in alumni programs which highlight prominent alumni and help with fundraising. While no specific literature on this topic has been found and further research is required to study a possible link between the type of institution and AR professional identity construct, it is conceivable that a high level of institutional leadership support for the AR function and a strong institutional positioning of this function may reflect more dynamic and flexible funding and institutional governance structures. Indeed, such structures may be a fertile ground for entrepreneurial and innovative leadership, which is less constrained by its past practices and more inclined to invest in and support evolving professional areas, such as alumni relations. Accordingly, the type of institution item can be treated as secondary and possibly be taken into account with other internal institutional parameters, such as institutional age and institutional academic profile, discussed further.

Institutional age

Related to the above analysis of the institutional ownership type, the age of institution offers another angle for considering internal institutional factors (Figure 21).

Figure 21: Age of institution

Eight institutions (62%) that participated in this study were founded within the last 100 years, while five others (38%) were older than 100 years. The CEE region's recent past, dominated by state run institutions in all spheres of society, strongly affected the educational sector and made private institutions of higher education a relatively recent phenomenon. Not surprisingly, all five private universities (38%) were founded in the last 25 years.

Interestingly, four out of five respondents with a strong AR professional identity are from relatively "new" schools. Similarly to other institutional profile characteristics, this one does not appear to directly inform the process of AR professional identity construction, but can rather serve as a useful secondary descriptor, as suggested above.

University profiles: classical, specialised or professional school

Figure 22: Institutional profiles

Four participating institutions (31%) can be considered classical universities for the purposes of this study. Another nine institutions (69%) in this research, are professional or specialised schools, covering a variety of disciplines (for detailed institutional profiles, see Table 3).

The variety of institutional types in this study helped to attain a more nuanced understanding of how individual accounts relate to institutional contexts. As one research participant put it:

> “I think it helps that we are a professional school. But it can make certain things more difficult. It helps because you can focus your communications on one professional area, [although] it is making broader alumni connections less diverse and valuable.”
>
> (Hugo)

While four out of five research participants with a strong AR professional identity, are from non-classical universities, this does not appear to link directly to the way AR specialists construct their identity. Indeed, similarly to the other two institutional characteristics discussed above, the type of institutional profile could conceivably aid further conversation about the role of institutional leadership and in the situational positioning of an AR function (Chapter 5).

Other items related to the profile of participating institutions, such as degrees offered, number of enrolled students and alumni on record, ratio of local/international students and alumni, did not appear to be themes of particular interest for the respondents, nor were they themes that could tangibly contribute to the discussion about the construct of AR professional identity.

4.2.5 Mission and focus of alumni operation

When prompted to talk about the mission of their alumni relations operation, its objectives and focus, research participants were able to share some form of mission statement of their alumni operation and have a conversation about it.

Figure 23: Mission and focus of alumni operation

While ten respondents (63%) were clear about the content of the mission and confident in verbalising it, six other research participants (37%) appeared to be more ambiguous, uncertain and less concrete when prompted to share some programme examples linked to a shared mission.

It was not my intention to get polished formal mission statements that could be judged based on certain criteria, but rather to grasp how respondents talk about their units' purpose of existence, as they see it. Importantly, it was also about how confident they were and how it could reflect on their professional identity construct. Accordingly, the most frequently used words to describe the AR mission were "engagement," "fundraising" and "serving." Other phrases included "connecting," "relationship building," "involvement," "getting support," "promotion," "community," and "keeping in touch." Attempting to verbalise their unit's mission, respondents appeared to blend unit mission, unit functions and programmes, their individual job portfolio and their personal understanding of what alumni relations in general is supposed to achieve. Interestingly, somewhat vague and less confident mission accounts were focusing primarily on the functional side of the alumni operation, listing roles and describing processes, not what the alumni programmes were supposed to achieve. For instance, "asking for support" or "promote the university" did not go as far as to specify why "support" or "promotion" was needed. Some respondents, like the one cited below, were focusing on a variety of details, combining several levels of programme description, mixing all these together, without appearing to have a coherent, be it complex or simple, understanding of the general aim of these activities:

> “We help alumni to get cheap tickets to the theatre and museums. We also offer scholarships for students. It’s good for alumni, because they aren’t just flying away and we care about what they do.”
>
> (Holly)

Another element of the conversation with study participants about the AR mission appears to be some form of reference to a shared common knowledge, which does not need to be explained, but simply hinted at. “Giving back” is something many AR practitioners have read or heard, perhaps from more experienced colleagues, and often repeat as a mantra without a clear understanding of what it actually means in the cultural and economic contexts of Central and Eastern Europe:

> “Well, as you know, the university gives […] education and opportunities that help [graduates] prosper in life, so [their] should give something back to the institution that made [them] an [educated] person […].”
>
> (Beatrice)

On the other hand, a significant proportion of research participants were able to share their understanding of the alumni relations mission, utilising a variety of individual approaches. These helped to get closer to the process of how these AR practitioners construct their professional identity around the core mission and values of alumni relations, as well as their professional roles and unit activities:

> “I want to have an active alumni organisation which supports the university. [We] have to earn the trust of our alumni, without unnecessarily bothering them. We have to offer them something that they will like.”
>
> (Elliott)

> “Alumni hold a huge potential for any educational institution. We need to make them active, then we [can] get a lot of benefit. We are trying to build some kind of alumni community, an emotional attachment towards the university. But right now, this two-way process is very weak. People don’t feel this emotional connection to the university, so there is a lot of work to be done.”
>
> (Daisy)

Combining the notions of the process oriented “nurture” and “cultivation” and the result focused “loyalty” and “relationship,” the next respondent elegantly adds a few concrete programme and outcome examples:

> “[Our mission] is to nurture and cultivate alumni loyalty towards the school. Loyal alumni can help graduates to get jobs and support university financially. One would have to invest a lot in the relationship, of course. Alumni are ambassadors of the school and are very important for the university’s brand promotion.”
>
> (Kevin)

On several occasions during the interviews, it was clear that through a sensible and articulate narrative of mission descriptions, respondents were talking about professional areas other than AR. Later, the data analysis and pattern mapping phases helped to see that these occurrences were not accidental, but rather projections of multiple items, later identified as the main components of how AR practitioners display their professional identities (Chapter 5). Holistically speaking, most things respondents were saying in our AR mission conversations could help the universities advance. However, it was more important to see which professional prism, values, algorithm and language respondents were using. It was difficult to pinpoint, but sometimes this part of the conversation appeared not to be linked to alumni relations. For instance, the two respondents below knew well what they were talking about, however, alumni appeared to be more of a tool for an effective "marketing campaign" to "strengthen the image" of their institutions. The language, programme tools and outcomes appear to belong to the area of marketing rather than alumni relations:

> "Our mission is to raise and strengthen the image of [our] university. So, everything I do here in the alumni office is part of our marketing."
>
> (Isabelle)

> "Our mission is to connect with our alumni in order to extend the reputation and improve the brand of our university through them."
>
> (Beatrice)

The following two research participants appear to understand the core AR concept, which is developing and sustaining mutually beneficial relationships between alumni and the university. They appear to live through their professional missions and blend their understanding of the alumni relations in their institutional context with their unique professional narrative, which may be an indicator of a strong AR professional identity:

> "Our mission is to support the university and [at the same time] develop the alumni network as a big bank of opportunities, where alumni can 'deposit' their talents and services, which can be utilised by other members of the network."
>
> (Marie)

> "[We help] former students to keep in touch with their university and [nurture] this relationship in order to build a better future for the university and its current students."
>
> (Alexandra)

4.2.6 Alumni relations unit structure and institutional positioning

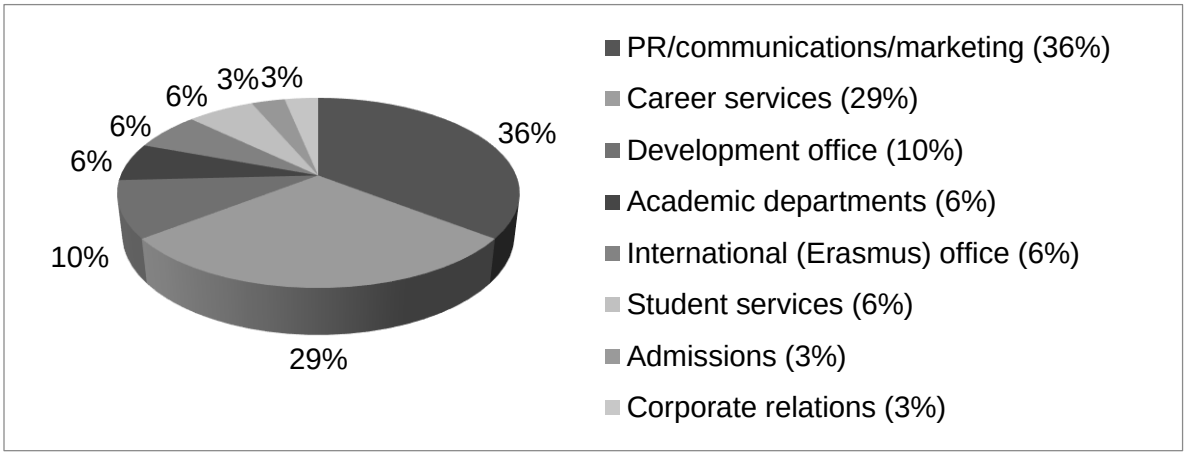
Figure 24: AR unit structure and positioning

Four respondents (25%) stated that their alumni relations operation is led by a separate entity (association), hosted on the university premises and is logistically and financially dependent on the university. Another four study participants (25%) indicated that their alumni relations office is an autonomous unit within their university's administrative structure, which provides an appropriate degree of internal institutional partnerships and collaboration. Another eight research participants (50%) indicated that their alumni relations operation is fully integrated with the work of other units within the university.

Interestingly, in this study the most popular integrated function was linking alumni relations and career services, as indicated by four respondents (25%). Three respondents (19%) reported that their unit is integrated with public relations & communications units. One respondent (6%), representing an integrated unit, specified the development office as the host unit for the alumni relations operation.

Related to collaboration, colleagues from the following areas were mentioned as the ones AR staff work the most with (respondents could name more than one area):

Figure 25: AR's closest collaboration with colleagues from other units



> "Most of my operational activities are cross-linked with the development office. In fact, we really support strongly the development and marketing offices. The same goes for the career […] office, which benefits from alumni sharing job ads and contacts with employers."
>
> (Marie)

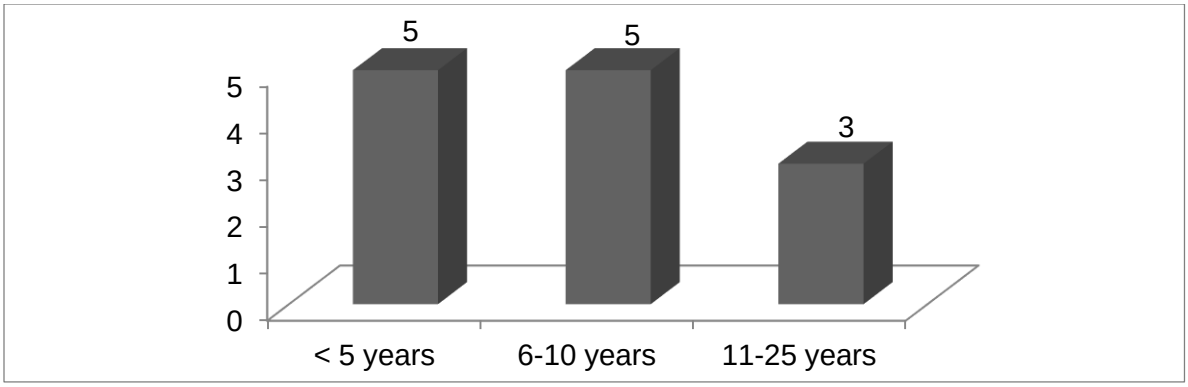
4.2.7 Other themes related to the alumni relations unit

Institutional age of the alumni relation function

As the age of the alumni relations unit was part of the standard questionnaire, this item in the same way as most other factual questions, did not produce a significant narrative content during the interview. Indeed, respondents' answers were short, factual and often approximate, thus had to be crosschecked with available institutional records and online resources. My assumption was that the age of alumni relations function could be a factor of the professional identity construct. If not on its

own, then possibly linked to whether respondents started alumni operations from the very beginning of the unit's existence or continued an already well-developed operation (briefly discussed in Section 4.3.4). However, no correlation was found between the age of alumni function and professional identity construct. Indeed, based on the institutional history of most universities in Central and Eastern Europe, with very few exceptions, alumni relations is a somewhat new function and thus has had a relatively short history as an administrative unit or as a separate function within an integrated unit, as shown in Figure 26.

Figure 26: Age of the 13 alumni relations units in participating institutions



As can be seen from the above, most alumni relations programmes in this study are younger than ten years. As such, these can be placed somewhere between the "start-up" and "intermediate" stages of programme maturity (CASE, 2016, p. 5). Naturally, these programmes are very new compared to the first alumni class and system of records of the 18th century Yale University in the Unites States, or the alumni relations professional area celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2013 (CASE, 2013).

Physical location of alumni office

Another institutional context factor, which surfaced during the interviews, without producing a significant volume of data, was the physical location of alumni relations units. The majority of respondents said that their office location and space serve their work needs well. At the same time, reflecting on the reality of a small integrated operation, many research participants were making references to being hosted by another unit, which does not appear to promote a strong AR professional identity:

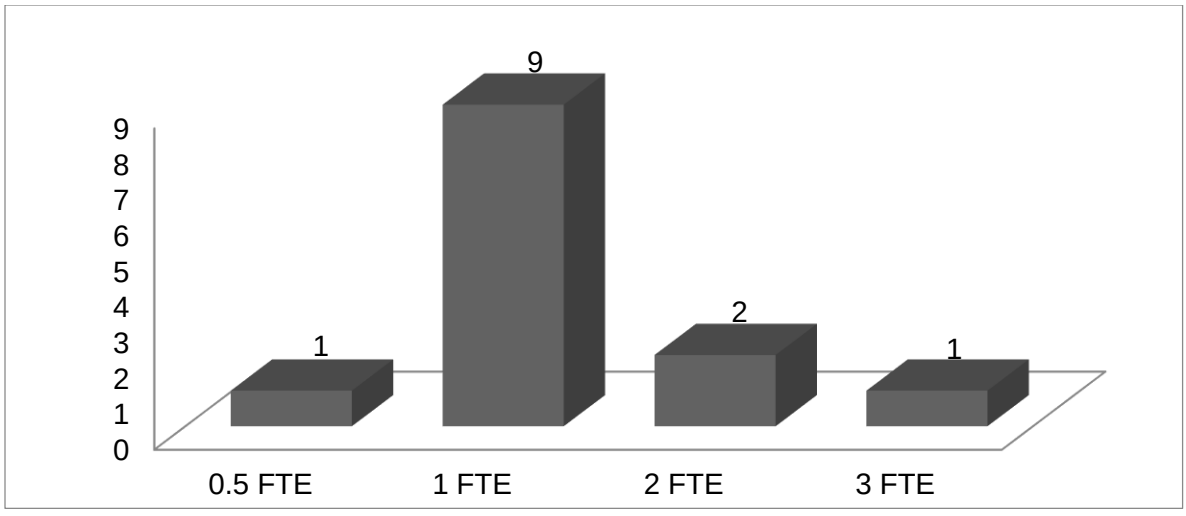
> "My office is actually in the main building, so it is the most important building, where our communications unit is located. The communications department must always be in the centre of everything."
>
> (Daisy)

Only one participating institution employing two staff members had its alumni office located outside the premises of the main campus. However, this university invests in AR staff more than others in this study (see Figure 27). Thus, the simple logic of the office location referring to prestige or its proximity to the institutional leadership did not produce much relevant data, nor did it pinpoint an additional important factor in the AR professional identity construct.

AR staff and budget needs

Ten out of thirteen (77%) participating institutions employ one or less than one full-time AR professional staff (Figure 27), which is significantly less than in the comparable US (VAESE, 2016, p. 18) or UK (CASE, 2016, p. 4) institutions. While this study has not found the number of full time staff employed in alumni relations to be a significant factor of the AR professional identity construction, at least one full time staff commitment appears to be a necessary threshold indicating a degree of institutional support and AR programme sustainability. Moreover, the number of AR staff per institution was found to be one of the characteristics shaping the AR role and institutional positioning, which affects the way AR practitioners construct their professional identity (Chapter 5).

Figure 27: Number of full-time employees (FTE) in alumni relations in participating institutions



One of the peculiarities of the alumni relations operation in CEE higher education is the way the work with alumni can be divided among and/or delegated to a variety of administrative or academic staff, or indeed, part-time students and volunteers. Not only does this make it difficult to estimate the AR staff commitment in Full Time Equivalent (FTE), but also adds to a challenging project ownership and job-share environment, which often creates ambiguity and puts extra pressure on the only AR employee in the institution. Not surprisingly, the following respondent's external and internal environments did not help her to attain a strong AR professional identity:

> "Not long ago, alumni relations was done exclusively by volunteers, usually retired professors. So my position was, in fact, the first attempt to professionalise the [AR] office. Unfortunately, I am still only working part-time for alumni."
>
> (Beatrice)

On the one hand, the largest proportion of participating institutions report having one FTE staff dedicated to alumni relations. On the other hand, most interviewees said there is other part-time, often temporary project-based staff or students, and/or staff based in academic units- that are involved in the alumni relations operation. This complicated picture is becoming even more complex when we look into how the alumni relations function is positioned administratively and see whether it is integrated within some other administrative area (Section 4.2.6), potentially affecting the level of loyalty towards the AR professional area and the professional focus of AR practitioners.

Figure 28: Staffing and budget needs

As indicated above, most participants in this study are the only full-time alumni relations employees within their institutions. Half of the pool, i.e. eight people (50%), believe that there is a need for additional alumni relations staff. At the same time, five respondents (31%) think that there is a need for some additional budget for alumni relations activities.

Reflecting on budget and staffing issues is often associated with a certain level of professional seniority and supervisory authority. This assumption is supported by the fact that most of those who reported concerns about staffing or budget needs were senior staff members, who primarily deal with planning and supervision. While “not having enough staff to complete the necessary tasks” tops the agenda of US based AR professionals (VAESE, 2016, p. 11), it should be noted that participants in this study believe that merely having an alumni relations function is a large enough institutional investment. In fact, many of them would rather hope that the AR unit will be supported at the current level, avoiding possible staff and/or budget cuts and associated requests that they should prove that AR is worth supporting. Assuming that the alumni relations area would benefit from improving project management and reporting processes, it appears that the earlier reported “lack of trust” and the need to “constantly prove yourself” puts some additional pressure on and negatively affects the confidence of AR staff, stretching their professional identity. More importantly, however, four out of five respondents with a strong AR professional identity share concerns over their small alumni relations operation budgets and/or lack of AR staff at their institutions. While not a strong independent factor affecting the AR professional identity on its own, this could affect respondents’ plans to stay mid to long-term in alumni relations. Having such plans with the intention of a

continued career in alumni relations is identified as one of the features of a strong AR professional identity.

4.2.8 Direct supervisor

Figure 29: Research participants by main reporting line

The main direct supervisory lines for the research participants appear to be placed within four main levels of seniority: Seven rectors/vice-rectors (43%); three directors (19%); three heads of units (19%) and three unit managers (19%).

In the study, all those identified as having a strong professional identity are supervised by representatives of the two highest levels of seniority. This does not suggest that the level of supervision determines how alumni relations professionals construct their professional identity. Rather, a positive correlation of the level of supervisory seniority can be linked to the overall institutional structure, the place of the alumni relations unit within the institution and the support it gets from institutional leadership. The latter, as noted before, appears to play an important role within the overall institutional environment for the alumni relations function and the way alumni relations specialists construct their professional identity.

4.2.9 Institutional leadership

Figure 30: Level of support alumni relations receive from institutional leadership

Four research participants (25%) shared their appreciation of the *high level* of support from their institutional leadership for the alumni relations operation and the clear institutional strategy in regards to the alumni relations direction and its value for the institution. Six respondents (37%) indicated a *moderate level* of support from their institutional leadership, which could provide some backing for the alumni operation, but would neither see it as a core priority function, nor have a clear institutional strategy for the development of alumni relations. Four research participants (25%) were not entirely content with what they believed was a relatively *low level* of their leadership support for the alumni relations area. This somewhat negative sentiment had to do with the lack of understanding of the role and value of alumni relations, as well as frequent changes of leadership. Two respondents (13%) could not give their opinion on the role of leadership and its support for the alumni relations operation at their institution.

Leadership support is important and reassuring, as conveyed by the following research participants:

> "I report directly to the Rector, but I had to convince some people at work. But now that they are convinced, I do have a good support."
>
> (Janet)

> "The key person in the university is the Rector. We meet only a few times a year, but I can feel his support."
>
> (Marie)

Being conceptually centred around a long-term view and investing strategically into relationships with former students, alumni relations experts often see themselves among the most vulnerable groups of professionals on any campus, affected by the type of leadership, its continuity, institutional priorities and direction. The following two respondents lament their experience with leadership change and associated challenges for the alumni relations area:

> "With the arrival of the new Rector, the decision was made to move some [AR] functions to the development office. These changes were not well thought through and did not have a solid AR strategy behind them."
>
> (Leila)

> "While we actually report to the Marketing Director and Vice-Rector, things always depend on the Rector. In the past, the alumni office had a lot of attention, and the Rector wanted to focus on this project. Now the new Rector has other priorities and is not especially interested in this at the moment."
>
> (Isabelle)

4.3 Career Trajectory

The following section discusses key topics related to research participants' career path captured by this study's data categories, shown in Table 7. These categories, related to the broad theme of career trajectory, are grouped based on their possible significance for the AR professional identity construct and their content richness in the interview narratives.

Table 7: Career trajectory categories

Gender of interviewee	Starting alumni relations operation from scratch?
Age of interviewee	How the interviewee got this job?
Graduate of the school-employer (disregarding timing)	Formal training and initial professional affiliation, prior to alumni relations
Position of the interviewee (formal title)	Professional training and development
Number of years in higher education	Benchmarking and assessment
Number of years in alumni relations	Critical incidents

4.3.1 Research participants' gender, age and alumni status

As discussed above (Section 3.2.4), age distribution within the research participants' pool is quite balanced. At the same time, female participants are in majority (75%). Serving as objective bio data and reflecting workforce trends in higher education in the CEE region, neither gender nor age appeared to be of major significance for the process of alumni relations specialists' professional identity construct. Nevertheless, there is a possible indirect link between age, gender and other factors linked to the career trajectory items discussed below. For instance, future research could investigate a possible link between family and maternity/paternity patterns in the context of Central and Eastern Europe and the way respondents talk about their experience of *getting an alumni relations job* and seeing their *future in higher education*. On another note, whether or not an alumni relations specialist had studied (at any point in time) at their current employing institution did not appear to have a significant correlation with professional identity markers and other factors contributing to the professional identity construct of alumni relations specialists.

Figure 31: Research participants' alumni status

Six participants (38%) graduated from one of the study programmes at their institution, while another ten (62%) were never enrolled in any of the host institution's programmes.

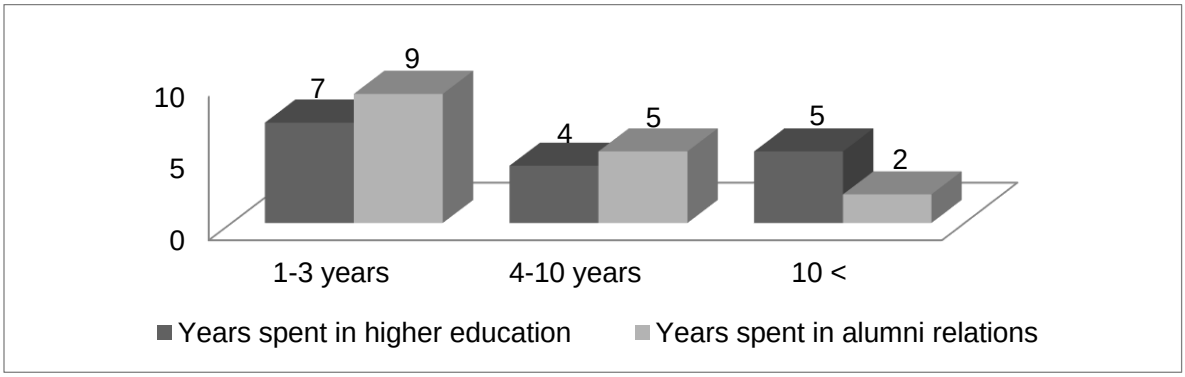
4.3.2 Formal job title

Detailed individual seniority lists and job titles are discussed in Section 3.2.4, which makes a note of a good spread of job titles and positions within the interview pool, with an emphasis on middle and senior management staff. Interestingly, 12 (75%) out of the 16 informants, have the word "alumni" in their title (see the full listing in Appendix 1). However, neither the job title nor the presence or absence of "alumni" in it appears to be an important factor for the alumni relations professional identity construct (Section 4.1).

4.3.3 Number of years worked in higher education and alumni relations

Figure 32 shows the range of work experiences with two distinct but related trends. On the one hand, the largest proportion of respondents are relative novices in alumni relations, with nine (56%) out of 16 having worked in alumni relations for three years or less. On the other hand, the same number of respondents, nine, (56%) have six or more years of work experience in higher education.

Figure 32: Respondents by years of work in higher education and AR



4.3.4 Starting the alumni relations operation from scratch?

Figure 33: Starting up or continuing the work of others

Eight respondents (50%) were the first alumni relations staff members at their respective institutions. Another four respondents (25%) became the first dedicated alumni relations staff, with some previous work related to alumni relations done on a part-time project basis and/or by volunteers. Yet another four research participants (25%) were hired for their position in an already established alumni relations unit.

Being the first dedicated alumni relations staff at an institution does not appear to strongly affect the professional identity construct of AR specialists. Indeed, many of them had very little training, often being told what to do, and learning on the go. This type of environment does not naturally create a space and the right context for planting and growing something which could later become a strong professional identity. One of the respondents describes her way of jump starting alumni operation:

> "When we set up alumni relations in 2001, we created it from literally nothing, no office and no clues. The two of us were in the marketing office and we were told that we would be alumni relations project managers. So we started from scratch, putting numbers [and] names in an excel file."
>
> (Isabelle)

The numbers of respondents with a strong AR professional identity are distributed almost evenly among these three different paths. Two (12%) respondents with a strong AR professional identity were starting the alumni operation from scratch, while another two (12%) started within an established alumni relations operation. One (6%) respondent continued some initial work done by volunteers and part-timers.

4.3.5 Formal training and initial professional affiliation, prior to alumni relations

Figure 34: Research participants by formal training & professional background

The smallest proportion of research participants are in the group which consists of four teachers of languages or mathematics (25%). The other two groups are comprised of six respondents (37.5%) each. One group includes respondents with their initial primary training and professional affiliation in marketing, communications & PR. Another group of a similar size consists of a broader based pool of research participants, primarily affiliated with two or more areas, related to business and including customer services and economics.

As can be seen above, the pool of research participants is almost evenly divided into three major areas of formal training and primary initial professional affiliation.

Importantly, the data on formal education and training, as well as initial professional affiliation applies to the period prior to starting the alumni relations job or joining institutions of higher education in the capacity of administrative staff. For those respondents who have several degrees and professional certifications, the training and professional affiliation which they considered primary were selected. The following section elaborates more on the role of formal training and initial professional affiliation.

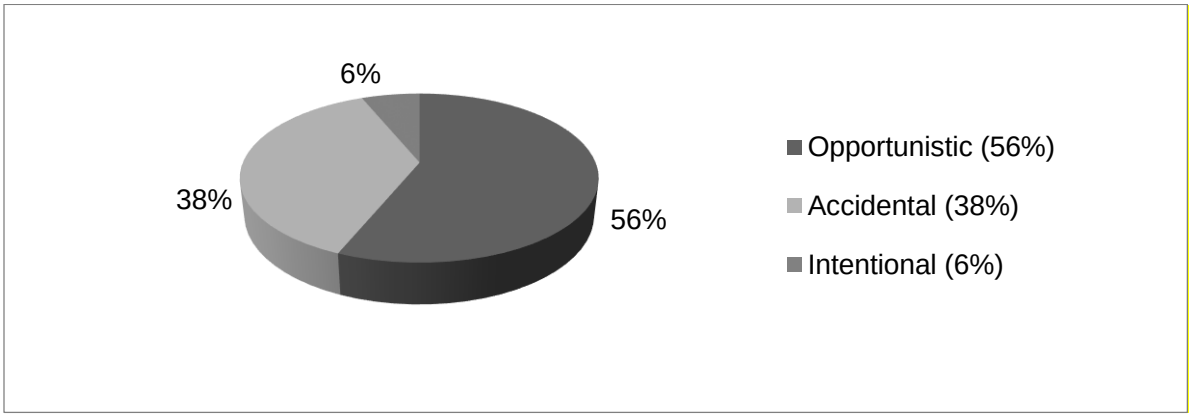
4.3.6 Ways of finding the AR job

Bearing in mind the discussion in Section 4.2, which deals with some aspects of the external environment and the perception of alumni relations in the respective societies, it did not take me by surprise that there was only one (6%) respondent in the "*intentional*" group, purposefully looking for an AR position and landing in the alumni relations office. It is certainly unsurprising that the respondent consciously seeking for a job in AR is identified as having a strong AR professional identity. What appears more nuanced is how the other two groups of respondents were formed, including those who learned about an AR job by accident, and those who were actively engaged in a job search and came across an opportunity in the AR area. As far as the "*accidental*" group is concerned, for six (38%) research participants the alumni relations job was more of an *accident*, something they were asked to do or was discretionary and added to their portfolio. They could not change or modify that offer. While they could probably have decided to leave the employer, they chose to stay. Importantly, the main reason for them to stay did not have much to do with alumni relations, but rather with the respondents' wish to keep their status and/or

stay with the employing institution. The latter can be linked to a group of respondents called “residents,” discussed further in this study and mainly concerned about their affiliation with and loyalty to their host unit and employing institution (Chapter 5).

The last and largest “*opportunistic*” group of respondents consists of nine (56%) practitioners who were initially not interested in, looking for or even aware of alumni relations jobs. However, while purposefully looking for jobs within the area of their initial professional interests (e.g. communications or marketing) and/or attracted by working in the higher education sector, they came across an alumni relations job and saw it as a potentially interesting *opportunity*. Figure 35 shows how these three groups of AR staff are distributed among the research participants.

Figure 35: Paths to alumni relations jobs



Related to the above findings and further discussed in Chapter 5, the terms “accidental professional” and “accidental administrator” have been widely used in regards to university administration, especially in the European context (Morgan, 2010; Paterson, 2016). Broadly qualifying for “accidental professional,” the biggest

proportion of alumni relations practitioners in this study follow the somewhat "opportunistic" pattern of career path towards their positions in alumni relations. For the purposes of this study, I make a distinction between "accidental" and "opportunistic" career paths. This distinction aims to add to the nuanced understanding of how AR practitioners manifest their professional identity as well as focus of their primary motivation to do an AR job. The latter, together with professional background and training prior to AR appeared to play a role in the AR professional identity construction (Chapter 5).

4.3.7 Professional development and training opportunities

Taking into account the different countries involved, the variety of job experiences, time spent in alumni relations, different levels of seniority and managerial responsibility, we observe several professional training patterns. With the exception of one recently hired AR staff, who did not participate in any training, we can identify three main clusters of professional training experiences.

Figure 36: Professional training experiences

Six respondents (38%) indicated that they had participated in one or more EU funded programmes. Another popular way to obtain professional training is by participation in local workshops and conferences. Five research participants (31%) had attended locally organised conferences and workshops. Only four respondents (25%) had taken part in alumni relations professional training run by a professional association.

Being one of the building blocks of any professional area (Cunningham, 2008b), knowledge and skills transfer can be seen as an important factor in the AR professional identity construction. As the following respondents report, a lack of structural professional training opportunities and the need to learn fast on the job appear to be important issues shared by many alumni practitioners in the CEE region:

> "It was only last year that I realised that what I am doing [in alumni relations] was professional work, which requires […] professional training and development."
>
> (Marie)

> "[When the AR office was set up], I was not prepared to be an alumni officer, I was not trained for this. So we learned day by day."
>
> (Isabelle)

Based on this study data and its geographic focus, the most popular way to offer alumni relations staff training appears to be through the EU Erasmus+ training programme, aimed at supporting education, training, youth and sport in Europe ("Erasmus+ EU programme for education, training, youth and sport," 2016). It must be noted though that training functions organised within the Erasmus+ framework, as well as local CEE conferences usually focus on various areas of university management rather than on alumni relations. The majority of such events and training functions would be based on sharing peer experience, thus heavily depending on the history and general level of development of a particular

professional area in a given country and institution. Such programmes would rarely include the extensive participation of professional trainers or consultants, or a professional association's training course certification.

> "When I went for my most recent Erasmus+ training, I was disappointed. I visited well-respected schools. They face the same problems as we do, like bad alumni records, and issues with connecting to foreign alumni, but their alumni programmes were not working very well and I could not learn much there."
>
> (Holly)

> "Professional alumni trainings and conferences are too expensive, so we do not attend them."
>
> (Hugo)

There were, however, four respondents (25%), who reported full-fledged alumni relations professional training events. These AR specialists participated in at least one CASE training. Also, many of them had also participated in a study visit to a UK or US based university that had an advanced alumni relations programme.

> "I visited a NYC based university to study the work of the alumni office and later that year went to a CASE conference."
>
> (Kevin)

> "The first time I went to a professional conference I was like - 'Wow' … they are having the same problems as I do. After the first conference, I was able to put some of our issues on paper. It was a huge benefit for me."
>
> (Janet)

While being an important element of building on professional knowledge and expertise, advanced professional training does not appear to be a major factor of the alumni relations professional identity construction. Perhaps it is a general prerequisite and a useful way to explore the field and compare yourself to others, rather than a key factor in professional identity construction. Indeed, all but one research participant had attended some form of professional training. At the same time, only half of those four respondents who had been through advanced and varied professional training were identified as having a strong AR professional identity (Chapter 5).

4.3.8 Benchmarking and programme assessment in alumni relations

Figure 37: Alumni relations benchmarking and programme assessment

Five respondents (31%) could not comment on how their alumni relations programme was doing in comparison to similar programmes nationally or internationally. Eleven research participants (69%), including all five respondents with a stronger AR professional identity, mentioned their programmes' leading positions nationally, with some respondents favourably comparing their AR programmes internationally.

Linked to professional learning and exchange with colleagues from other institutions, benchmarking can be considered an important element of the maturity of a profession. Accordingly, benchmarking is the process of comparing one's performance metrics and processes to peers and industry bests. It may involve collecting multiple institutions' data on a particular issue, comparing institutional performance over time, and then "using the perspective gained for internal continuous improvement" (CASE, 2016, p. 3). Simply having access to some form of assessment criteria can tell a lot about a profession and its standards. Indeed, this is linked not only to the frequently mentioned "need to prove" the importance of alumni relations within the institution, but also to some form of "managerial professionalism" (Whitty, 2008). Regular assessment and evaluation requirements create an incentive for a benchmarking culture. One can argue that such a culture is important for an evolving profession trying to position itself.

> "[We] started from scratch and we have to understand what stage we are at – especially in comparison to universities the US and the UK."
>
> (Janet)

Furthermore, any process of outcome assessment, including a comparative analysis of performance indicators and trends, can make an alumni relations professional raise important questions. These questions are about the very reason why the alumni relations area exists, what it is supposed to achieve and how different it is from other disciplines. These are the types of questions which may affect professional identity construction. However, the respondents' feedback on the topic of assessment, including how they would position their institutional AR function

within a wider professional field, was rather vague. Interestingly, most of them could not specify their claims by referring to some data or concrete examples.

> "I don't know how well are we doing. We plan and do some things through the alumni programme because we saw it somewhere. Interestingly, other universities in the [country] are trying to do similar things by copying our ideas."
>
> (Chris)

Very few respondents mentioned their participation in local or national conferences or seminars on alumni relations. Even when they do, these events do not appear to provide the information and training both applicable in practice and assisting in planning and benchmarking. Importantly, the way AR staff have access to and utilise professional training and development opportunities affects their learning about the profession and the way they apply this knowledge. The relatively low number of focused AR professional training sessions and conferences in the CEE region coupled with the financial limits on travelling beyond national borders for in-depth professional training negatively affects the AR staff's capacity to benchmark their AR programmes and ultimately evaluate their progress.

4.3.9 Critical incidents

As discussed in Chapter 2, "critical incidents" or "significant events" may play an important role in non-formal learning at work, possibly affecting the professional identity of those involved.

Figure 38: Critical incident reporting

When asked to share an event or incident which conceivably affected the way they practice alumni relations, five research participants (31%) did not have anything to report. and eleven respondents (69%) briefly described such an event.

As discussed in the Literature Review Chapter (Section 2.3.1) and contrary to some reports (Kuit et al., 2001), all but one respondent in this study chose to share an experience perceived as somewhat more positive than negative. Indeed, most of the reported accounts have something to do with overcoming a challenging situation, boosting self-confidence and seeing the positive results of their own professional efforts.

> "One of the biggest events of my professional life was to get the University Board agree to finance alumni work. It was difficult to make the request, but it was a success. I got the funding - the biggest amount ever given to alumni relations here."
>
> (Daisy)

While providing useful accounts about research participants, the narrative and types of critical incidents reported in this study do not appear to add a significantly new layer of factors, substantially adding to our understanding of their professional identity construct. Indeed, critical incident accounts of both those with strong AR professional identity and the rest of the respondents share some common themes. These themes appear to primarily relate to institutional structures, discussed in

Section 4.2, and include AR institutional legitimacy and perception of a challenging work environment, administrative positioning and resource allocation, as well as leadership support.

4.4 Conclusion

Chapter 4 offered an overview of the findings of the study and painted a complex picture of the professional identity construct of alumni relations practitioners working in Central and Eastern European institutions of higher education. Three sections of this chapter intended to provide a better understanding and pinpoint the findings of this study, including its key elements: how AR practitioners manifest their professional identity; the way contextual external and internal institutional factors may possibly affect alumni relations professional identity construction; and how an individual's career trajectory influences the process of AR professional identity construction.

The next and final chapter offers a further synthesis of the findings. It reveals more nuanced information about research participants who appeared to construct a pronounced alumni relations professional identity and looks into the main factors affecting professional identity construction. The final chapter also makes an attempt to identify areas for future research and for more examination of the most significant findings that could best inform the future practice of alumni relations practitioners in the CEE region and beyond.

Chapter 5 – SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

In this final chapter, a more nuanced exploration of the key topics pertinent to the AR professional identity manifestation, as well as the main factors and variables affecting the construct of the AR professional identity are discussed. In addition, an overview of the study, as well as implications for research into the practice of alumni relations in CEE higher education institutions are highlighted.

5.1 Constructing the Alumni Relations Professional Identity

5.1.1 Five features of a pronounced alumni relations professional identity and five practitioners displaying it

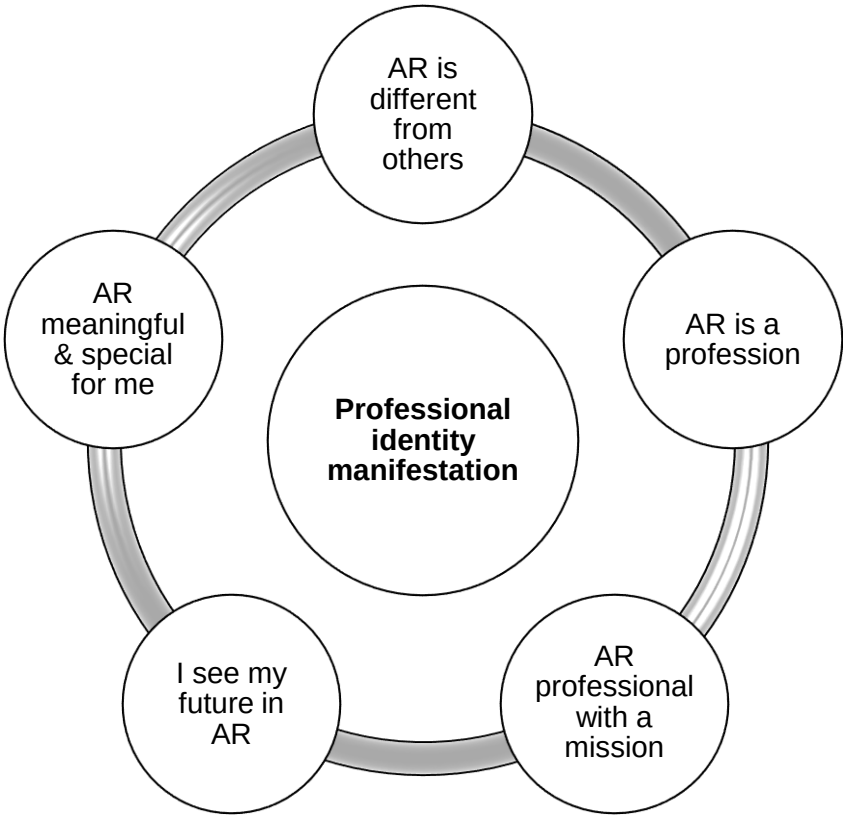
The data analysed in Chapter 4, helped to pinpoint five professional identity characteristics that are likely to be associated with a pronounced alumni relations professional identity. These characteristics encompass “the attitudes, values, norms, language, and perspectives necessary to interpret” professional experiences and meanings (Perna and Hudgins, 1996, p. 5), and are centred around the following five types of statements gathered through this study interview process:

- alumni relations area differs from other disciplines in some important ways;
- alumni relations is a profession;
- I consider myself to be an alumni relations professional with a clear mission;
- alumni relations is a meaningful and special area for me;

- I can see my long-term future in alumni relations.

These items, depicted in the below Figure 39, were not meant to serve as a fine-tuned scale instrument “designed to measure professional identity” (Woo, 2013, p. 1), but rather to help reflect on data emerging from this particular study and to inform respondents’ segmentation and possible identification of factors affecting the construction of respondents’ professional identities.

Figure 39: How the AR professional identity can be manifested



Coming through the Professional Identity Manifestation themed analysis (Section 4.1) and informed by the framework of strong professional identity characteristics

displayed in Figure 39, the total population of respondents was segmented (categorized, grouped, classified) in Table 8 by identifying those whose interview narratives and answers appeared to indicate a pronounced alumni relations professional identity or reflect on their other possible affiliations. Accordingly, my main task here was to identify the respondents who display an alumni relations professional identity in the strongest possible terms, based on the criteria suggested above. Identifying respondents who did not appear to be constructing a robust AR professional identity, but rather seem to have other professional areas that are more pronounced, was done for illustrative purposes and does not substitute further research that might be required in order to appropriately investigate their non-AR professional identity construct.

Importantly, terminology used in the current section, and specifically in Table 8 is derived from a detailed analysis of the main factors affecting the AR professional identity construct, including composite variables of institutional context (*peripheral, secondary, support,* and *core* institutional **AR positioning**) and individual **career trajectory** (*specialist, experimenter, resident*), discussed further in this Chapter.

Table 8: Respondents' professional identities and key factors affecting them

Name	Career Trajectory	AR Positioning	Professional Identity
Hugo	Experimenter	Core	**Alumni relations**
Leila	Experimenter	Core	**Alumni relations**
Marie	Experimenter	Core	**Alumni relations**
Alexandra	Specialist	Support	**Alumni relations**
Chris	Specialist	Support	**Alumni relations**

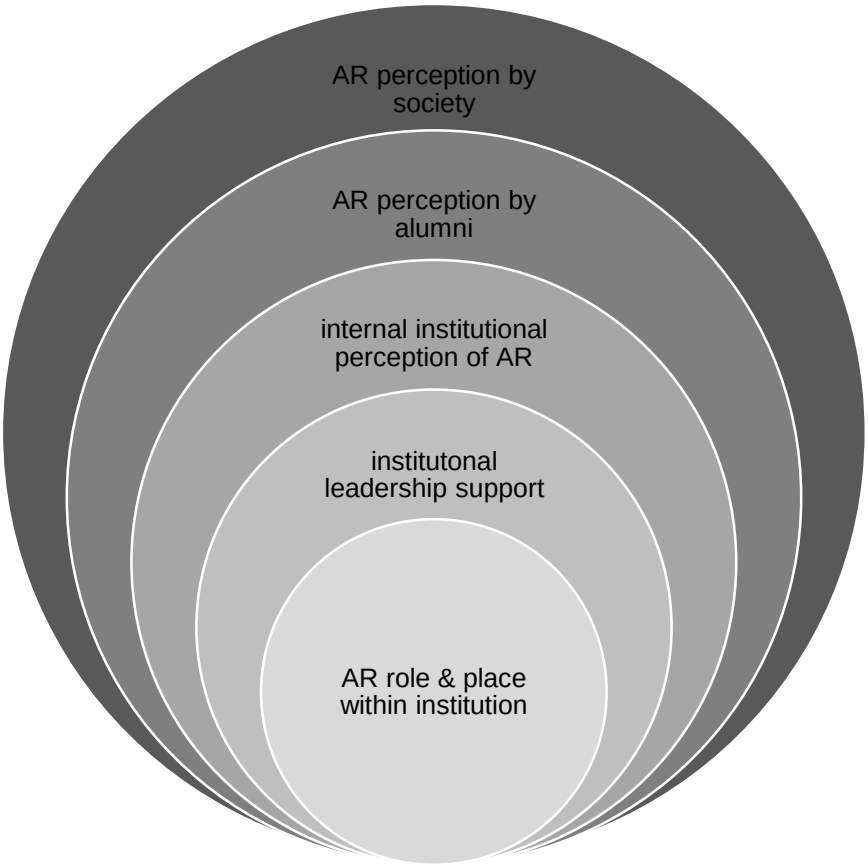
Beatrice	Resident	Peripheral	Administration
Elliott	Resident	Support	Administration
Holly	Resident	Support	Administration
Felicity	Resident	Support	Career services
Fiona	Resident	Support	Career services
Gertrude	Resident	Secondary	Career services
Grace	Specialist	Secondary	Career services
Janet	Specialist	Support	Fundraising
Isabelle	Specialist	Secondary	Marketing
Kevin	Specialist	Core	Marketing
Daisy	Specialist	Secondary	Marketing

Exploring characteristics of a pronounced AR professional identity and identifying the above practitioners who display it helped to cross-link them with the two key structural (AR institutional positioning) and agentic (individual career trajectory) professional identity construction factors. However, before further exploring the ways those complex factors were identified and linked to the AR professional identity, we could benefit from a more nuanced conversation about one of the key characteristics of the AR professional identity construct in the study. Indeed, the following conversation about “strained” AR identities may help to contextualise some sensitive areas, as experienced by AR practitioners who construct their professional identities.

5.2 Contextual Factors and “Strained” Alumni Relations Professional Identity

As briefly discussed above, a range of interconnected factors identified in the study under the broad umbrella of “External Environment” and “Institutional Context” appear to play a role in how AR staff construct their professional identity (Figure 40).

Figure 40: External environment and institutional context



Legislature, society, culture and history: all these could have an impact on how a given country perceives alumni relations. Conceptually based on the engagement of multiple internal and external stakeholders, alumni relations specialists often find themselves in the centre of interfacing and connective roles, within and beyond the

classic “triple-helix” model of university-industry-government relations (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 1998). It adds to the complexity of the alumni relations professional identity construct, stretches the attention span and possibly negatively affects the capacity to grasp core professional values for many novice AR specialists, who often find themselves “sitting on two” or more “chairs.” The following two research participants gave examples of identity stretch by highlighting the extreme diversity of their professional roles and challenges of inter-connecting multiple stakeholders

> “It’s hard to explain, but it’s like I am sitting on two chairs. If you speak about one of my roles, it is very bureaucratic and technical. [My] other role is creative and client oriented.”
>
> (Janet)

> “The fact that we are a very big organisation makes things very complicated. [I cover] internal communications with departments and external with state [institutions] and alumni, often finding this [process] very blurred.”
>
> (Chris)

While a detailed account of some typical tensions and problems AR specialists face was discussed earlier (Section 4.1.5), many of them are related to AR professional identities being “stretched” (Hill, 2007; Whitchurch, 2009) or “split” (Costello, 2005; Zock, 2008). Indeed, what many respondents praised as one of the attractive features of alumni relations - diversity of roles and activities - can often have an undesirable effect. If one considers an AR program portfolio, it may sometimes include project management, alumni communications, special events and reunions,

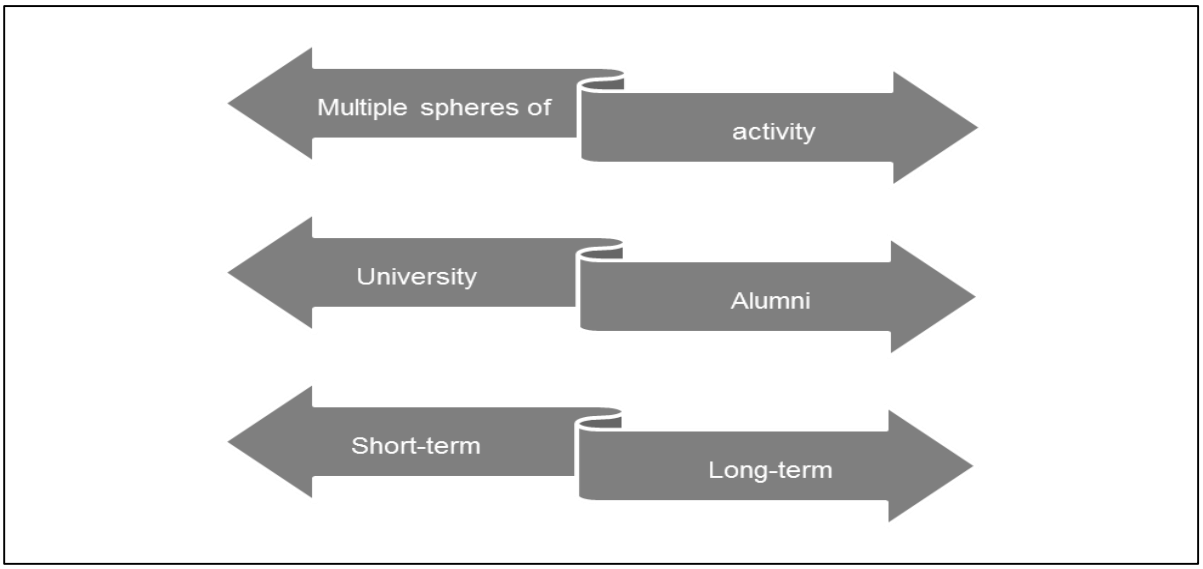
fundraising, volunteer management, alumni associations, alumni services and databases. In the realities of a small office, the AR practitioner is “stretched” between the requirements of different functions and roles, and forced to negotiate her role with leadership and other units, as well as work through multiple collaborative and/or integrated internal processes. In parallel with this professional domain “stretch,” AR staff have to engage with the university’s biggest constituency - alumni, and often connect with other major stakeholders, such as employers and government. Sometimes, priorities and short-term interests of the university and these stakeholders may not coincide, which might create a tension between the status of a university employee and service to alumni.

> “Currently we do more friendraising, providing opportunities for alumni to meet and benefit. [At the same time], we try to explain [that] our institutional leadership [requests] to focus more on fundraising, [which is] not liked by many alumni.”
>
> (Beatrice)

The “identity stretch” or “identity split” described above has a multi-dimensional nature. For the purposes of this research and based on the identifiable tension points as highlighted above (Section 4.2), a three-dimensional model can be appropriate as one of the ways to illustrate the phenomenon. Such a three-dimensional framework can include the “identity stretch” between diverse AR roles, the tools and “spheres of activity” (Whitchurch, 2009); the “identity split” in an effort to loyally serve and connect the employing institution and its alumni; as well as a lack of a clearly identified and supported AR operation mandate, “stretched”

between the short and long-term interests and priorities of employing institutions (Figure 41). The latter is linked to a lack of legitimacy and thus a constant need to "prove your value," without access to clear assessment and evaluation criteria. Within such a multidimensional context of "identity stretch", in this study it appears appropriate to talk about the "strained" professional identities of AR practitioners.

Figure 41: The multidimensional identity "strain" of AR practitioners

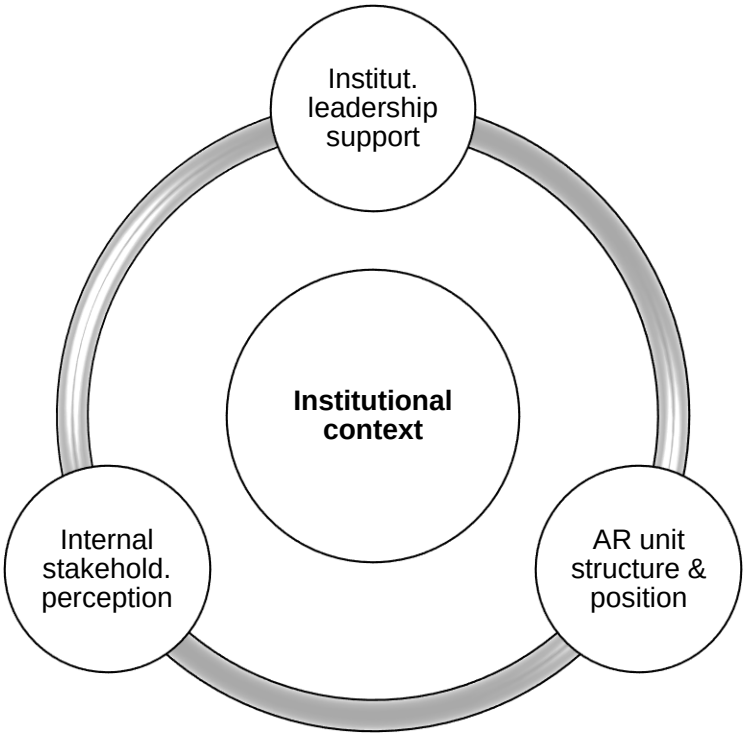


It is conceivable that the alumni perspective on alumni relations often depends on the type, duration and volume of alumni relations programmes in a given institution. While there is some indication that graduates are starting to appreciate the role of alumni relations, the lack of society's understanding of and enthusiasm about alumni relations in the CEE region is still a significant factor that negatively affects the legitimacy of alumni relations. This kind of external environment, coupled with the internal lack of legitimacy within respective institutions for this newly evolving professional area, make the multidimensional AR professional identity "strain" more distinctive and acute.

5.2.1 The significance of institutional context

As AR is part of a wider social structure, the way society perceives and treats it creates a general atmosphere and context for both external (society and alumni) and internal (staff and faculty) stakeholders to perceive and interact with alumni relations programmes. Together with institutional leadership support, these affect the role and place of alumni relations within given institutions of higher education in the CEE region. Accordingly, based on this data analysis, three interconnected institutional context factors appear to have the main impact on the AR professional identity construct: institutional leadership support; internal stakeholders' perception; and AR unit structure and positioning (Figure 42).

Figure 42: Key institutional context factors



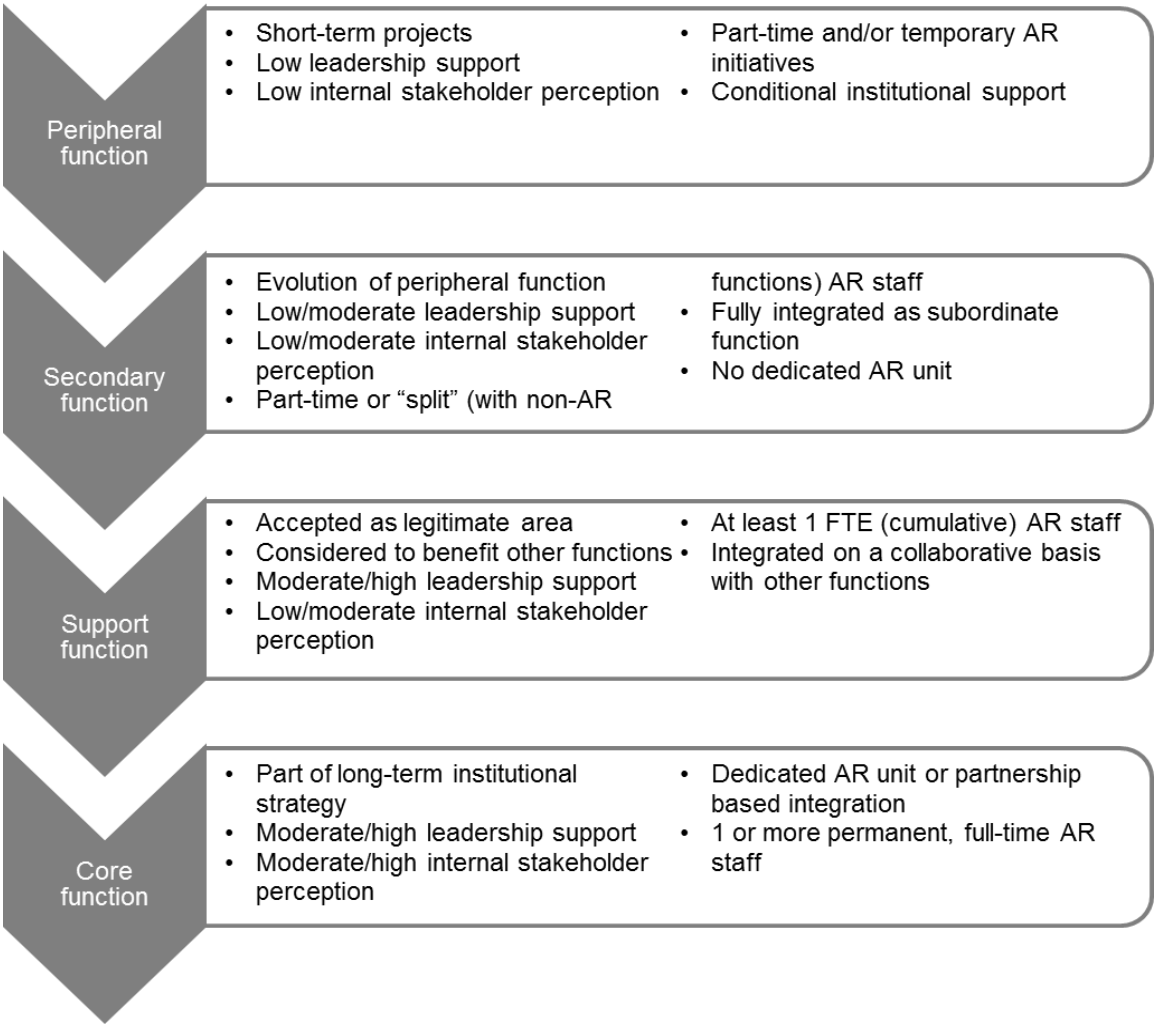
These institutional context factors can be seen as both affecting and reflecting on the prestige and legitimacy of the alumni relations professional area, shared by internal institutional stakeholders and shaped by the institutional leadership through a particular mode of positioning alumni relations within institutions of higher education in the CEE region. This institutional positioning is linked to the way AR staff construct their professional identity. For instance, the respondent below describes the way some research participants see the role and position of AR within their institutions, highlighting the AR support efforts that affect the professional reputation and identity construction of AR:

> "I would never say that anyone within [our] university sees [alumni relations] as a main area. Everybody understands that this is [more] about supporting others and they evaluate what we do, accordingly. [Some colleagues] think we don't do much (*laughs*), [but] students, academia and alumni benefit from our projects, so I hope I don't have a bad reputation."
>
> (Janet)

Based on this study, we can propose several interconnected fluid categories that may describe the possible role and positioning of AR within institutions of higher education and depict some of the typical characteristics associated with them. This combination of role and positioning serves as a composite variable, combining multiple institutional context factors. These incorporate, among others, all three institutional context factors (Figure 42), as well as staffing and resource allocation. Accordingly, institutional context is considered a composite variable, with four

categories identified in this study: *peripheral; secondary; support; and core* functions of alumni relations (Figure 43).

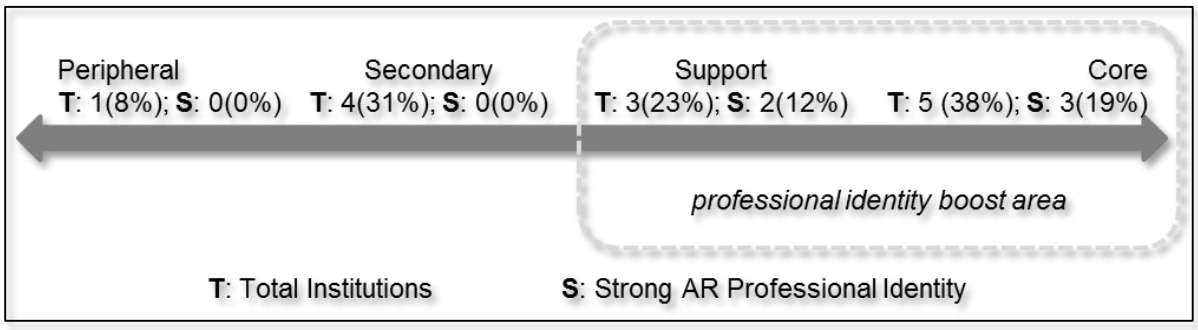
Figure 43: Institutional context: role and place of AR within institutions



The above framework is not a static construct, but rather a possible model of variables and associated secondary factors, illustrating possible combinations of characteristics, associated with the AR professional identity construction. As these are fluid groupings without fixed structural or time boundaries, various combinations of the characteristics listed are possible. Nevertheless, our study data suggests that

AR staff employed by institutions that position alumni relations within a *support* or *core* function modelled above appear to be better placed to cultivate a pronounced AR professional identity within the professional identity boost area, as shown in Figure 44. Please note that 13 institutions participating in the study are counted as 100% total for T (Total Institutions). While the pool of 16 respondents represents 100% of all individual participants, only those who are considered to exhibit strong AR professional identity characteristics (depicted by letter S) are displayed in Figure 44.

Figure 44: AR institutional positioning and professional identity construct



Having unrealistically high expectations from short-term investments in AR often results in cuts or freezes of institutional support for AR. However, the institutional positioning of the AR area depicted above may positively affect not only the AR professional identity construction, but also stop an initial urge to “downgrade” AR on the institutional priority list and add institutional legitimacy to often undervalued AR practitioners.

5.2.2 Alumni relations practitioners: undervalued, but improving their image

Identified in Section 4.2.3, a lack of understanding and recognition of importance of alumni relations, often linked to fluctuation of priorities, frequent institutional changes and a lack of institutional commitment to AR, appear to negatively affect the AR professional identity construction. As shown in Section 5.2.3, these factors are often associated with a short-term view of alumni relations, utilising ad hoc funding opportunities at the expense of long-term plans. For instance, the long-term engagement strategy is perhaps dropped in favour of organising a major anniversary event or investing in an online networking tool, which might later prove to be an unsustainable one-time effort, making a powerless AR staff deal with disappointed alumni and other stakeholders.

The lack of understanding of alumni relations as a relationship building and engagement concept creates a tension between long-term strategic interests and the perceived immediate needs of universities. It is often complicated by a lack of a clear alumni relations unit mandate, as alumni are often seen as a constituency that "belongs" to many units within the university, though not all the units have the capacity and expertise to engage alumni. Indeed, some universities without a clearly defined integrated alumni strategy and internal structure have "pockets" of units and staff at different levels of academic departments, central administration and professional services (e.g. fundraising, human resources, marketing) who deal with alumni, often without coordination and on an ad hoc basis. Even in institutions with clearly defined centralised alumni relations operations, the relationship between the central alumni relations office and academic departments is sometimes strained due

to a disagreement over priorities, alumni “ownership,” records, communication and internal processes.

In this environment of no clearly defined mandate and considerable competition for institutional attention and resources, the often single alumni relations specialist within the institution may need to regularly prove herself as a professional and effective employee. With a blurry definition of what constitutes success, and because of the lack of assessment tools and evaluation criteria, the professional identity of AR practitioners appears to be further “strained”.

Within the above description, a fundamental professional identity issue arises – whose interests do alumni relations professionals serve – their employer or alumni? Many of the respondents say that they serve both their institution and alumni interests, which are interconnected and mutually beneficial. However, at times of shifting priorities, it appears that institutional goals are of primary concern to alumni relations professionals employed by these institutions. As discussed in Section 5.2, it is not always easy to accept that one’s employing institution is in a position to “dictate” the priorities for the relationship with its often biggest constituency. This further complicates the situation with the conceivably “strained” AR professional identity.

On the one hand, in Central and Eastern European countries, many believe that universities should focus on enrolled students and academic work. The role of alumni within this paradigm is often perceived as an unnecessary cost-associated activity, rather than something worth attention and resources.

> “There are some departments which think that I give them extra work, because I ask them to [share] alumni records. There are nine departments and twenty thousand students, so I cannot keep my eye on everything (laughs), but I do need their help. At the same time, there are some departments [which] think that what I do is very important. So, it is both ways. I think in every university you would have [some tension] between the central services and the academic section.”
>
> (Daisy)

However, based on the study participants’ views, an increasing proportion of institutional stakeholders are becoming more supportive of alumni relations. Indeed, 81% of participants experienced and shared (see Section 4.2.3) a *moderate appreciation* of their work by their fellow university staff and faculty. More importantly, the internal stakeholders’ perception (*low and moderate appreciation* indexes reported in Section 4.2.3) affects the work environment, which can be supportive, neutral or putting more pressure on the AR professional identity. Either way, together with three other institutional context factors (Section 5.2.1), internal stakeholders’ perception appears to correlate with the way the alumni relations area is positioned within the institutions of higher education participating in this study (Figure 44), and thus play a role in the AR professional identity construct of research participants.

5.2.3 The role of institutional leadership and the "need to constantly prove yourself"

Both through the study interview narratives and data analysis, it appears that institutional leadership support is an important factor in AR practitioners' professional identity construct. All research participants identified in this study as having a pronounced alumni relations professional identity (Section 5.1) indicated a *high* or *moderate* level of support from their institutional leaders, thus creating an "AR professional identity boost area," depicted in Figure 45.

Interestingly*, a low level* of leadership support appeared to correlate with *the lack of an alumni relations strategy and clear direction* (three respondents). Reported direction ambiguity and a lack of AR value assurance, unlike "freedom to do things," appear to be connected to the responses indicating a vague understanding of the AR mission. The lack of full appreciation and a clear understanding of the alumni relations mission was shared by all those who thought they received a *low level* of support from their institutional leadership:

> "We have a new Rector and a new Vice-Rector, but for several months already we have been unable to meet them. We would like to ask for some direction, because we don't want to do something that they wouldn't like us to do."
>
> (Beatrice)

Another aspect highlighted by research participants was the lack of stability and frequent change of leadership. It appears that every time there is a change of

leadership, the alumni relations staff needs to “earn” leadership trust and need to prove again that alumni relations is an area worthy of support.

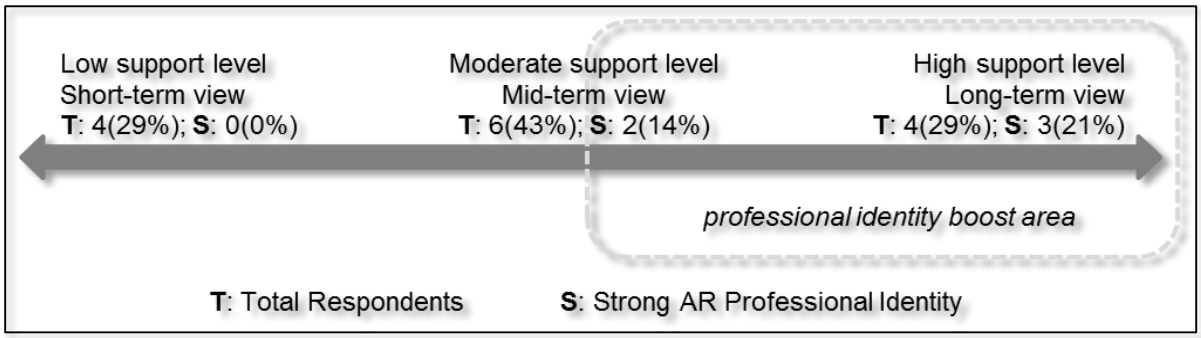
> “The alumni office is four years old and we have already had four different bosses and constantly changing structures. Now we are under the Director of Operations, which is a temporary position, and I have not even met him yet.” (Holly)

The above outlined need to constantly prove oneself, linked to a “return on investment” approach, connects alumni relations to the “managerial professional” discourse. Moreover, the way the alumni relations operation is positioned within institutions sometimes relates to efforts to integrate revenue generation functions under one administrative umbrella. For instance, three respondents indicated the revenue generation based positioning of alumni relations, together with student admissions and fundraising functions.

For alumni relations, the role of institutional leadership in internal value recognition is difficult to overestimate. The spectrum of leadership choices in regards to institutional investment in alumni relations is widely represented throughout interview narratives, ranging from trying to “test the water,” be “like others” and “use opportunities” by focusing on short-term results to putting alumni relations as one of the institutional priorities and investing long-term in this area (Figure 45). Please note that 14 respondents are counted as the 100% total for T (Total Respondents), with two remaining research participants unable to answer the question about institutional leadership support. Likewise, the strong AR Professional Identity index

(S) is calculated on the basis of 14 respondents' total pool, serving as the 100% base.

Figure 45: Institutional leadership and support patterns



The following two research participants provide examples of conditional alumni programmes support based on a constant re-evaluation of short to mid-term results:

> "Our director wants to 'test the water' … be careful with the alumni project. He wants to see if the students really want it and if it starts working."
>
> (Grace)

> "Currently alumni relations does not have enough weight and is still in a pilot phase, pending further evaluation."
>
> (Hugo)

5.2.4 “Finding or fighting for their place”

While a significant proportion of the findings of this study and the factors related to the AR professional identity construction can be linked to the individual “agency” domain, institutional “structure” plays an important role, especially in “a state of flux in which many modern institutions […] manifest not only the effects of technological developments but altering patterns of meaning, value and normative human participation in work” (Casey, 2013, p. 201). Indeed, linking structure and agency angles, the following research participants provide a vision for their AR professional domain. The emotional component of hope and seeing a positive or difficult path ahead is as important as structure and institution-specific details, focused on how the respondents actively negotiate, plan and possibly affect their institutional positioning. In this regard, respondents identified as having a pronounced AR professional identity tend to be more agentic in responding to institutional structure. There is some nuance, however. While “specialists” appear to be preoccupied with their short-term professional agendas and are often focused on “finding their place” within institutions, those identified in this study as “experimenters” appear to have a more proactive and strategic institutional role, often challenging and seeking to change some elements of institutional structure.

Possibly related to the level of development of alumni relations within a given institution, we see a variety of potential AR evolution scenarios shared by the research participants. On the one hand, alumni relations can become or remain a *core function* (Section 5.1.1) institutionalised in the form of a dedicated administrative unit with further possibility for an increased specialisation within the

alumni relations unit. This is the path that requires long-term investment and institutional leadership support, which appear to be associated with a stronger AR professional identity:

> "In a few years' time, I can see myself managing an office with three full-time employees, something closer to a good US or UK school. There would be a membership officer, an events organising officer and an alumni magazine editor."
>
> (Isabelle)

On the other hand, many alumni relations start-ups can evolve through some form of collaborative or integrated function, often attached to more revenue focused units (e.g. development) and/or units with significant budget and administrative resources (e.g. marketing):

> "We are part of the marketing department, which has money. If the alumni office becomes independent, alumni should pay a membership fee. I do not think we can do that. So, we have to continue to be part of a strong [marketing] unit."
>
> (Isabelle)

> "I align with the vision of our current President, who thinks that the development office [with its alumni relations component] and admissions, the offices that bring income, should be developed further and hire more people."
>
> (Alexandra)

Following the logic of “finding their place” within their institution, the administrative reality of integrated offices often favours one professional area over another. Whether alumni relations is even mentioned in the name of an integrated unit or in staff titles can be just one way to examine the institutional legitimacy of the AR function. Indeed, out of the eight (50%) respondents who were serving on integrated teams, only two said that the name of their integrated unit had the word “alumni” (careers and alumni office). This simple formality of unit names and the perceived value of the professional area appears to have some connection with how alumni specialists construct their professional identity. Indeed, all but one staff member working within an administratively independent or autonomous alumni relations unit considered alumni relations a profession. It is conceivable that the administrative positioning of an alumni relations unit is an indicator of institutional commitment to alumni relations, and along with other structural factors, forms an important contextual category which relates to the way AR practitioners construct their professional identity.

AR is seen in a variety of institutional scenarios, from being a *subordinate* part of a “strong entity” like a PR office or revenue generating development office, to more equal *collaborative* or *partnership*-based relationships, like alumni and career offices. The difference primarily lies in the perceived legitimacy and prestige of professional areas, as well as tangible resources, including operational budget and staff. These are linked to internal decision-making processes, budget allocation authority and level of (inter)dependency. There is another relationship format, “integration on paper,” as one of the research participants put it. It is often a formally integrated operation, with participating units acting fairly autonomously. These

structural factors responsible for the administrative relationship between AR and other professional areas are part of the institutional context categories discussed above (Figures 43 and 44) and may independently serve as factors affecting AR professional identity construction, as shown below.

Figure 47: AR unit relationships with other administrative functions

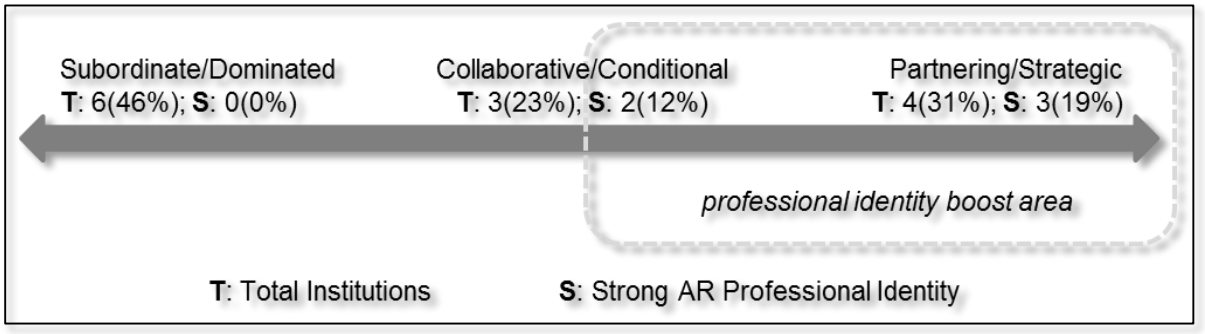
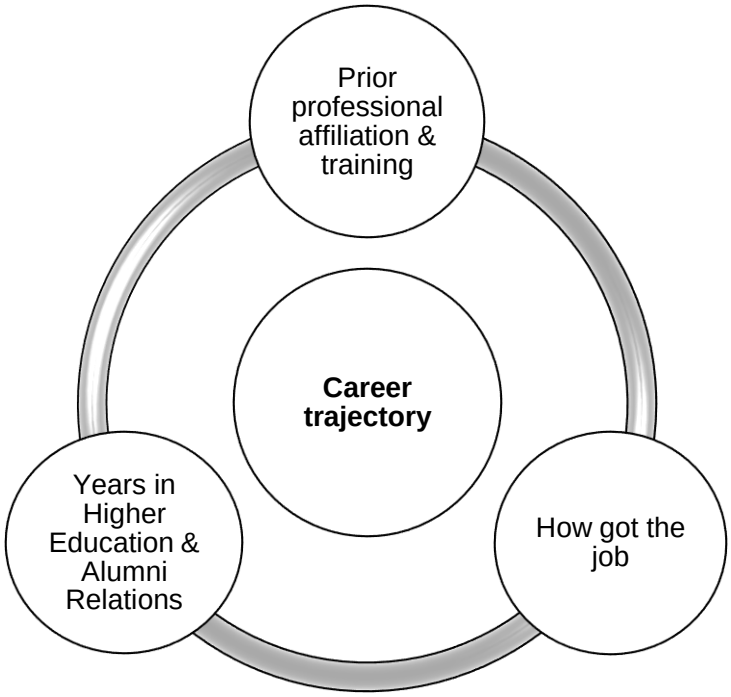


Figure 47 positions 13 participating institutions (Total Institutions) and shows respondent numbers with a strong AR professional identity (S), based on the pool of 16 respondents. This visualisation helps better understand the dynamic and positioning of administrative units and how the professional identity of AR practitioners is formed in this context. This feeling of freedom to do things, "crossing borders," and at the same time, search for identity and attachment to a "better established" professional area can be seen as blend identity construction, affected by the peculiarities of the institutional context and structural positioning of AR units.

5.3 Career Trajectory as a Factor of Alumni Relations Professional Identity Construct

The data analysed in Section 4.3 and throughout Chapter 4 helped to pinpoint three factors associated with the career trajectory of individual respondents and appearing to have an impact on their professional identity construction. These factors, depicted in Figure 48 help to reflect on data emerging from this study and identify the key characteristics associated with the AR professional identity construction.

Figure 48: Key factors of career trajectory



5.3.1 Prior professional affiliation and training

The alumni relations multiple functionality and a wide range of programme tools deployed by other professional areas (e.g. communications, fundraisers, events' organisers, data specialists) create a "more diffuse, fluid and less organised" (Muller, 2009, p. 215) environment for the AR professional identity construction, possibly

adding to the AR professional identity stretch, as discussed earlier. Furthermore, a combination of a not fully formed professional training system and an immature "knowledge base" makes the professional identity construction of AR practitioners less "stable and robust." Due to the weakness of a knowledge base and the instability of a professional network, it appears that constructing a strong alumni relations professional identity requires more effort and motivation than in more established professions with "a robust professional habitus and identity in their practitioners" (2009, p. 215).

Likewise, it is usually challenging to convert an established professional, for instance from the area of marketing and communications, into an alumni relations expert. Getting a significant number of "specialists" from other professional areas to start working in alumni offices creates a particular dynamic of the alumni relations professional identity construction. On the one hand, this dynamic may inhibit the development of a strong AR professional identity. Indeed, the stronger non-AR professional identity of these "specialists" prior to starting their alumni relations job, the more challenging it is for them to develop a robust alumni relations professional identity. On the other hand, some AR practitioners with formal training and experience in non-AR fields sometimes develop a stronger AR professional identity than others. In this study, two respondents identified as "specialists" and coming from a marketing background appeared to successfully develop a solid AR professional identity, in contrast to some others, including career services specialists and higher education managers (Section 5.1.1). This nuanced dynamic may indicate a degree of the proximity in functional and programme tools of some professional areas, like marketing, to the AR field, making the transfer from one professional area

to another smoother and more robust. At the same time, the career trajectory remains just one of several factors possibly affecting the AR professional identity construction. Other factors related to structure, e.g. how the alumni relation function is positioned within the institution and how institutional leadership support or undermine this function, also play a role (Section 5.2.1).

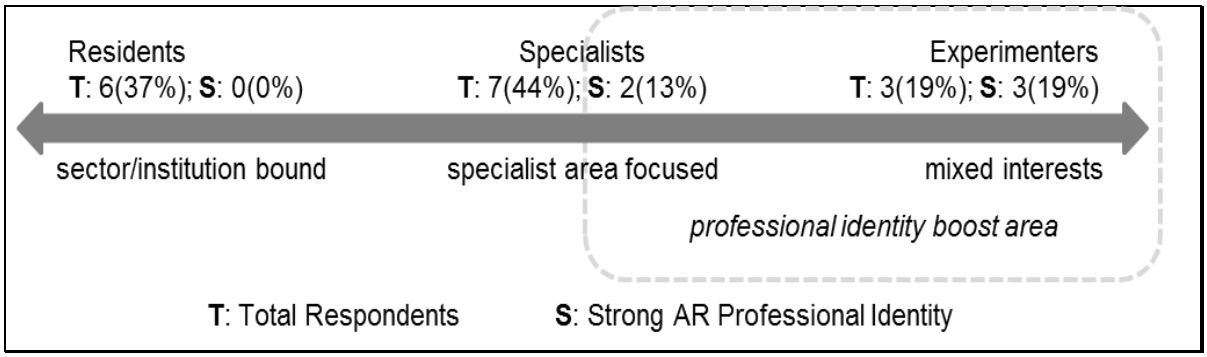
To conclude, as long as alumni relations is lacking a comprehensive professional development programme to establish itself as a more mature and developed profession, “specialists” are likely to continue to “migrate” from other professional areas, as indicated above. With the further evolution of the alumni relations area in the CEE region and with more access to formal training and professional affiliation, fewer “migrants” and, perhaps, more AR trained “specialists” will be joining alumni relations. This trend, if it materialises, could significantly facilitate the development of a strong AR professional identity.

5.3.2 Why “experimenters” and “specialists” can be better positioned to develop a strong alumni relations professional identity

Acknowledging the complexity of decision-making and the variety of motivating factors for respondents to pursue a particular career path, I have attempted to identify if there were trends in respondents’ primary motivation to pursue a career in alumni relations. A combination of the primary initial *motivation* to start an alumni relations job, the way respondents *got* their respective *AR positions* and their *professional background* and training prior to the AR job appear to have played an important role in the AR professional identity construction. Figure 49 shows how,

based on these factors, the 16 respondents (100%) within the 13 participating institutions (100%) can be clustered into three broad categories: *residents, specialists* and *experimenters.* While these categories are interconnected intellectual constructs, with various respondents possibly displaying some characteristics related to more than one category, my intention was to identify the strongest link to one category, based on job acquisition (how respondents acquired the job), job motivation (why this job) and their professional background and training prior to AR (what kind of education and professional experience they had prior to AR).

Figure 49: AR professional identity categories based on career path, primary motivation and loyalty positioning



Residents – 6 (37%) research participants, who are primarily interested in a particular place of work, be it in the higher education sector in general, or a specific institution. Most of them have spent 3 to 10+ years of work in higher education, often within the same employing institution. Similarly to "locals" discussed earlier (Section 4.1.3), residents' loyalty is primarily linked to their employing institution, while the alumni relations job, typically found by accident, can be seen as a way to keep that loyalty. While affiliation with the employer and/or the higher education sector appears to be their primary motivation, residents' possible secondary affiliation in

this study goes to the higher education administration area in general. Understanding the limitations of this small scale study, respondents categorised as "residents" appear to share some characteristics of Whitchurch's "bounded professionals" (Whitchurch, 2009) and Gouldner's "locals" (Gouldner, 1958, 1957). The research participant below illustrates this type:

> "I was for some time working as a secretary in another department and liked university environment a lot. When they decided to open an alumni office, my boss asked me take this position, and I agreed."
>
> (Holly)

Quite different from the group discussed above, s*pecialists* – 7 (44%) are those research participants who strongly affiliate with, focus on and are motivated by a particular professional area. Having discussed in the sections above the lack of the professional AR knowledge base, the absence of a robust course of study in AR, and the difficulty to switch from a strong non-AR focused identity to a pronounced AR identity, it comes as no surprise that most respondents in this study identified as "specialists" do not display characteristics of a strong AR professional identity. Indeed, only two of them are identified as having a pronounced AR professional identity, while the other five have stronger affiliation with marketing, fundraising and career services (Table 8). Many of them learned about alumni relations as an opportunity to pursue their career in a field they saw as close to their primary area of professional interest and, often, associated with their initial training and background. These specialists are primarily motivated by some of the programme tools and professional roles associated with an AR job. Such roles may include special events,

marketing, communications, fundraising, membership acquisition and services. The following research participant's training in communications, as well as her perception of alumni relations as a flexible area to try her marketing skills in led her to start an alumni relations job:

> "I [returned] from the UK, where I studied communications, to [my home country]. I was looking for something in marketing and communications, and saw an ad at the marketing & communications department. They had this alumni job opening, and it did not have very strict boundaries, you could be very creative in the role, so I thought I would try out my marketing skills here."
>
> (Daisy)

Perhaps more striking, the excerpt from the following respondent in charge of her institution's alumni operation does not appear so much as an alumni relations account, but rather as the story of a marketing practitioner. In the context of the following narrative, alumni appear to be just one of the audiences for a marketing strategy developed by a marketing specialist:

> "I started working in the marketing department [of the university] because they were looking for someone who could assist them. Then, I did an MBA and, later, a Master in Marketing. I re-educated myself, as I grew into the higher education marketing field and now I really like it."
>
> (Isabelle)

Finally, *experimenters* (mixed-interest group) – 3 (19%) are respondents with diverse professional experience and training prior to AR, for whom the alumni relations work is *both* an exciting and important professional area and a way to serve the significant mission and the needs of their potential clients. While only one participant is identified in this study as having done an intentional search for an AR position, the two others in this group were looking for opportunities to serve an important mission and deploy all their multiple professional skills and rich experience. The following passages illustrate how respondents with wide-ranging professional backgrounds and interests are prepared to experiment with their careers and jobs in order to serve important stakeholder groups via an interesting and purposeful professional setting:

> "There was a search for an alumni professional at a university. An acquaintance shared the ad with me, though my background was in engineering and I was working as a tax adviser at that time. I was happy that I was selected, as it is a more interesting and purposeful job."
>
> (Hugo)

> "With a background in economics and a track record in the management of educational projects, I was invited to assist with the first student recruitment campaign of the recently established school. When the first cohort of graduates was leaving the school, I had no clue that alumni relations was a profession. It was just that students became part of my life, so I applied all my previous experiences, intuitively setting up an alumni database [and] inviting alumni back on campus. It was an organic extension of my

> personality and my work experience. [When] the president of the alumni association sponsored [the first paid] position of alumni assistant, I became her supervisor and realised that I also became part of the alumni relations profession."
>
> (Leila)

5.3.3 "Less is sometimes more": years in higher education and alumni relations

It appears that respondents with a more pronounced alumni relations professional identity can be located at the two ends of the work timeline (Section 4.3.3). Indeed, it comprises primarily those whose work experience in alumni relations and higher education is three years or less or, at the other end, more than ten years. When work experience in higher education is much longer than in alumni relations or time spent in the alumni job is somewhere between four and seven years, a palpable decrease in loyalty to alumni relations as a professional area has been identified in this study. On the one hand, this possibly reflects the peculiarity of this study's pool of research participants, and eventually the evolution of AR as a professional area in the CEE region (Figure 26), linked to a particular dynamic of time spent in alumni relations. However, it does not explain the AR professional identity "time-gap", identified above. Indeed, it appears that those who have been affiliated with AR for a longer period and were able to "experiment" with a variety of fields and roles within and beyond institutions of higher education prior to their work in alumni relations, made their long-term commitment to AR, associated with a strong AR professional identity. These individuals, discussed in Section 5.3.2 are identified as "experimenters" for the purposes of this study.

At the other end of the time-line spectrum, professionals within the first three years in AR are well represented by three respondents identified as having a strong professional identity. One of them was affiliated with several diverse occupations prior to starting his career in AR as an “experimenter.” Two others can be considered “specialists,” who had a clear professional specialisation in one of the non-AR areas. These non-AR specialists then decided to migrate from a non-AR field to take up a position in alumni relations, often perceived as being close to their previous specialisation (e.g. marketing or PR) conceptually and in terms of programme tools.

Finally, a significant number of respondents, those between their 4th and 10th years of doing AR work, appear to be less loyal and committed to the AR profession, but rather anchor their identities around their pre-AR professional base and/or connect more with their employing institution. The latter appear to bear characteristics of “residents,” while the former are identified in this study as “specialists,” who did not “switch” from their non-AR area of specialisation to a pronounced alumni relations professional identity. Indeed, as discussed above, the stronger the non-AR focus, the more difficult it is for these “specialists to switch to an AR identity.” They are often more inclined to act as “portfolio professionals,” looking for better conditions and ready to move not only between institutions, but also between different professional fields, deploying their transferable skills in a variety of work environments.

Another possible aspect of the AR professional identity “time-gap” identified above might be due to the so-called “mid-career crisis” or “generation change” for alumni

staff, as discussed in Section 4.1. As shown in the same section, six (38%) respondents, primarily those at the two ends of the time line, plan to stay in alumni relations unconditionally. The other two (12%) plan to leave, with another eight (50%) considering leaving their alumni relations job in case some of their individual conditions are not met. Thus, it appears that the combination of time spent in alumni relations and higher education could add a more nuanced understanding of the process of professional identity construction for alumni relations specialists in the CEE region.

5.4 Conclusion

5.4.1 Overview of the study and summary of findings

The importance of the "alumni relations effort" and "capable alumni relations professionals" in advancing educational institutions in times of "constrained resources [and] global competition" has been widely discussed (Davies, 2010; Feudo, 2010; Lippincott, 2011). At the same time, alumni relations specialists and their professional needs and aspirations have not received adequate attention in either the academic or professional literature. The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which alumni relations specialists in CEE higher education institutions construct their professional identities, and to pinpoint the factors that affect the construction of these identities. These issues were explored through the prism of literatures on "alumni relations," "professionalism" and "identity." This research approaches the construction of identity as a reflexive process between the individuals and the structures in which they operate (Delanty, 2008; Giddens, 1991,

1984). In particular, this study has been inspired by Whitchurch's framework of professional identity (2013, 2006) and Gouldner's construct of "cosmopolitans and locals" (1958, 1957). For the current study, in-depth interviews with 16 purposefully recruited alumni relations specialists with diverse professional portfolios, varied seniority levels, experience and career paths have been conducted. The research participants represent eight CEE countries and thirteen institutions of various types, sizes and histories. The data gathered throughout this research and the emergent themes identified through data analysis have been synthesised to generate insights into the research questions and inform potential avenues for further research on and practice of alumni relations in higher education institutions of Central and Eastern Europe and beyond.

The analytical framework discussed in Chapter 3 has been utilised to explore and map the complex process of constructing professional identity, in order to answer the main research question: *In what ways do alumni relations specialists working in Central and Eastern European higher education construct their professional identities?* My sub-question was: *What factors affect the construction of these identities?* While not claiming it to be totally comprehensive due to its small scale, this study has helped to develop indicators of factors affecting professional identity. Moreover, a framework has been created to gain a more nuanced understanding of the topic within the given context and constraints. This framework has helped me identify three main themes that informed the exploration of how the professional identity of AR specialists is constructed:

- how AR practitioners display their professional identity (*professional identity manifestation*);
- how they become/evolve as AR practitioners, and whether this [*career trajectory*] influences their professional identity construction;
- how their institutional structures and external contexts affect the construction of their professional identities (*context of institutional setting* and *external environment*).

Professional identity manifestation

The interview data analysis for this study helped to pinpoint characteristics possibly related to a pronounced AR professional identity. These characteristics encompass "the attitudes, values, norms, language, and perspectives necessary to interpret" professional experiences and meanings (Perna and Hudgins, 1996, p. 5), and were centred around the following five types of statements gathered through my interview process:

- the alumni relations area differs from other disciplines in some important ways;
- alumni relations is a profession;
- I consider myself to be an alumni relations professional with a clear mission;
- alumni relations is a meaningful and special area for me;
- I can see my long-term future in alumni relations.

The above statements, attributing a high value to the alumni relations field and demonstrating a strong sense of affiliation with alumni relations are considered to relate to a strong AR professional identity among respondents in this study. While these statements were not meant to serve as a fine-tuned scale instrument "designed to measure [AR] professional identity" (Woo, 2013, p. 1), they helped to identify research participants who appear to share them by displaying strong AR professional identity characteristics. Likewise, it helped to segment respondents to analyse later in the study what factors may have affected the construction of their professional identities.

"Strained" professional identity and lack of legitimacy as inhibitors of a strong AR professional identity

As discussed earlier, signs of a multi-dimensional "identity stretch" or "identity strain" appear to be applicable in some form or another to all the participants of this study, thus inhibiting the construction of a strong AR professional identity. Indeed, major professional challenges, identified during the interviews and analysed through a three-dimensional model, have been linked to structures in which AR staff operate. They include *multiple spheres of activity*; serving *multiple stakeholders'* interests; and a possible dichotomy of *short* and *long-term* goals. More specifically, an "identity stretch" between specialists' different "spheres of activity" (Whitchurch, 2009), occasionally serving the conflicting interests of the employing institution and its alumni/partners, a lack of clearly demarcated and supported AR mandate, as well as being "stretched" between employers' short and long-term interests have been identified as possible causes for a professional "identity strain." Often exacerbated

by a lack of legitimacy, the absence of clear evaluation criteria, long-term priorities and a strong institutional commitment to AR, the need to constantly "prove" one's professional "value" puts extra pressure on AR practitioners, as reported in the study. Importantly, however, the latter structural factors, as well as the institutional positioning of AR, in combination with some agentic factors related to respondents' career trajectories, made a difference for respondents identified as "experimenters" and "specialists," as they had conceivably better chances to effectively tackle the "identity strain" and/or lack of legitimacy issues, in parallel with developing a strong AR professional identity. The mechanism of this process and the roles different factors play is discussed throughout this chapter and reviewed below

Structural factors affecting the construction of AR professional identity

Institutional "structure" appears to play an important role in the way AR practitioners construct their professional identity. Interestingly, while society and other external factors discussed earlier may conceivably affect the general atmosphere for major stakeholders to perceive and interact with alumni relations programmes, it is the internal institutional context that correlates with the construction of an AR professional identity. More specifically, three interrelated structural factors appear to show the strongest correlation with the way the AR professional identity of research participants is constructed: *institutional leadership support*; *AR unit structure and positioning*; and, internal (institutional) *stakeholders' perception*. These factors, together with staffing and resource allocation criteria, served as a core framework for the composite categorisation suggested, combining multiple institutional context factors. Accordingly, *institutional context* is described as a structural variable of this

study, with four broad categories proposed*: peripheral; secondary; support; and core* functions/positioning of alumni relations within a given institution (Section 5.2). The participating institutions, which position their AR operation within a *support* or *core* functional domain identified, appear to provide an institutional environment that may possibly encourage the development of a more pronounced AR professional identity, displayed by all “experimenters” and some “specialists.”

As part of the institutional context discussed above, *institutional leadership support* has proved to be an important factor in AR practitioners’ professional identity construction. Indeed, all research participants identified as having a pronounced alumni relations professional identity indicated a high or moderate level of support from their institutional leaders. Related to this, we see a variety of institutional space formats dedicated to AR. On the one hand, alumni relations can become a *core function* institutionalised in the form of a dedicated administrative unit. This is the path that requires long-term investment and institutional leadership support. On the other hand, many alumni relations start-ups can evolve through some form of collaborative or integrated function, often attached to a more established and better-positioned unit. The administrative reality of integrated offices often favours one professional area over another, with alumni relations often being a subordinate function dominated by another professional area. Whether AR practitioners are part of a *subordinate* function “belonging” to a “strong” non-AR specific unit or work within a more *collaborative* or *partnership*-based unit structures appears to affect their professional identity construction. Indeed, all five research participants, identified as having a pronounced AR professional identity, were affiliated with AR units, which

were positioned within a collaborative or partnering framework vis-à-vis other administrative units and professional areas.

Agentic factors affecting AR professional identity construction

While most of the findings of this study can be linked to institutional structure, the individual "agency" domain appears to play an important role in the way AR practitioners construct their professional identity. The data analysed earlier helped to pinpoint three main professional identity characteristics that appear to relate to individual respondents' *career trajectory* and impact their professional identity construct. These characteristics are *professional affiliation* and *training prior* to taking on an AR position; the *way a practitioner became employed* within the AR area; and the *number of years worked* in AR and higher education. Interestingly, while most AR practitioners in this study follow a similar "accidental" or "opportunistic" pattern of career paths towards their positions in alumni relations, this pattern can illuminate a combination of primary *motivation* and *professional background* and *training* prior to AR. Indeed, the main motivational aspects of taking a position in AR appear to be more important as factors affecting the AR professional identity construction. Acknowledging the complexity of decision-making and the variety of motivational factors, I have tried to examine if there are trends in respondents' primary stimulus to pursue an alumni relations career. Accordingly, three broad categories for respondents are suggested based on a combination of respondents' primary initial motivation to work in AR, the way they learned about

and/or applied for an AR position, and their professional background and training prior to the AR job*: residents, specialists* and *experimenters.*

Research participants identified as *residents* were primarily motivated by and loyal to a particular workplace*,* with none of them sharing characteristics of a pronounced AR professional identity. Most of them had within 3 to 10+ years of work experience in higher education, often within the same institution. Understanding the limitations of this small-scale study, respondents categorised as *residents* appear to have some characteristics of Gouldner's "locals" (1958, 1957) and Whitchurch's "bounded professionals" (2009).

Research participants who showed a strong affiliation with a particular specialist area, whether alumni relations or not, were tagged as *specialists*. Two of them are identified as having a strong AR professional identity, while others are affiliated with a variety of fields, including communications, marketing, fundraising and corporate relations. The proximity and links between AR and their non-AR area of professional interest, as perceived by specialists, made them consider a job in alumni relations. These specialists were primarily motivated by the nature of the job and the type of specialist roles associated with it.

Finally, respondents tagged as *experimenters* appeared to be willing to experiment with their diverse pre-AR professional experience, background and training. They perceived the alumni relations work as both an important professional area and a way to fulfil a major mission by serving key stakeholders' needs. These respondents are identified in this study as having a pronounced AR professional identity.

Related to specialists' career trajectory, an apparent time-linked pattern of the AR professional identity construct is explored in this study, possibly indicating that respondents with a more pronounced AR professional identity are located at particular intervals of their work timeline. A series of probable scenarios and explanations are offered (Section 5.3.3), from peculiarities of the AR professional area in the CEE region to somewhat more individual patterns related to respondents' motivations, career paths and professional backgrounds.

Formal educational background, professional affiliation and training prior to alumni relations

As this study indicates, some AR practitioners, with formal training and experience in other professional areas, can strongly affiliate with alumni relations and consider themselves AR professionals. These groups are tagged as "experimenters" and "specialists." On the one hand, the stronger the non-AR professional identity of these "specialists" prior to starting an alumni relations job, the more challenging it is for them to "switch" and develop a robust alumni relations professional identity. On the other hand, some practitioners with multiple experience portfolios and/or specialist disciplines, like marketing and communications, appear to be somewhat more likely to support the construction of a pronounced AR professional identity than some other groups, including career services specialists or higher education managers. This may possibly be linked to the proximity of some professional areas' tools and concepts to alumni relations.

Likewise, a career path leading to alumni relations appears to be more of an accidental opportunity rather than a well-planned process. Thus, the skills portfolio and knowledge are often brought from previous experiences, and are often associated with a strong demand to acquire new AR tools “on the job.” Some mainly short-term training programmes available focus on limited aspects of best practices or serve as peer-to-peer experience exchange forums, which may lack a robust knowledge base and an extensive conceptual background. The lack of a formal course of study in AR and the reported absence of extensive professional development opportunities in the CEE region can often be mitigated by practitioners developing the necessary competencies and knowledge through immersion in the field and establishing a mentoring relationship with more seasoned professionals. The latter, however, depends on the specialists’ exposure to AR professional networks, which are not always available institutionally or nationally, and not accessible internationally for many AR practitioners working in the CEE region. Seeing professional identity through the prism of “integration of personal attributes and professional training” (Burkholder, 2012, p. 297) highlights the importance of formal education and intentional professional training. A combination of an inadequate training system and an immature “knowledge base” makes the professional identity construct of AR practitioners in the CEE region less “stable” and appears to require significant effort and motivation in building “a robust professional habitus and identity” for AR practitioners (Muller, 2009, p. 215).

5.4.2 Challenges and opportunities for the alumni relations professional identity project

Issues of concern for alumni relations practitioners: comparative perspective

In order to sensitise the AR professional identity construction and to try to better understand the dynamic relationship between agency and structure or, in terms of this study, between "career trajectory" and "AR positioning," we should discuss some key issues that concern AR practitioners. One of the frequently cited features of the evolving AR professional area in the CEE region is the so-called "one-man shop" or one-person office. It often happens that the only AR staff in the office or the institution, the AR practitioner becomes a relationship hub and, often unintentionally substitutes the office brand with a more personalised image. In these circumstances, successful alumni relations practitioners often connect with stakeholders at a more personal level, sometimes simply because the AR office is very new and its internal and external profiles are not always crystallised. This condition often accompanies a start-up alumni operation, but with time this can backfire when, for example, hard choices are to be made and communicated to stakeholders. More often though, it becomes an issue when alumni relations staff have to leave the office and a new person would have to face a challenge of winning the hearts and minds of stakeholders, re-positioning the university alumni relations office as the main partner. Related to the above "small office" issue, some of the alumni relations practitioners see themselves as "small fish in a big pond." On the one hand, this underlines the role of a staff member within a complex institutional hierarchy, which is often perceived as insignificant. On the other hand, this self-disparaging metaphor can be explained by the lack of legitimacy and the frequently ambiguous positioning of alumni relations specialists within their institutions. This ambiguity, coupled with

the “one-man shop” dynamic, creates some tension, which strains the professional identity of AR practitioners (Section 5.2).

Possibly related to the peculiarities of the professional evolution of AR in the CEE region, comparing the issues of concern for AR practitioners in study (Section 4.1.7) with the latest discussion among alumni relations practitioners internationally, helps us notice some similarities and differences. In the Alumni Professionals Anxiety Index (VAESE, 2016) for nearly 500 AR staff in the US and internationally, 74% of respondents reported that the lack of workforce was their main concern (compared to this study’s 15% respondent concern over resource allocation and 50% concern over a lack of workforce). The second main issue reported internationally was the lack of alumni engagement (68%). Linked to this, a broader discussion among experts has identified “disintermediation” as a main area of concern for the future of alumni relations (Cohen, 2015; Shaindlin, 2014a, 2014b), unlike for AR practitioners in this study, which reports that a mere 15% of respondents are concerned about alumni engagement issues. Other areas of tensions ranked high by international observers are a disproportionate attention to the development (fundraising) and “return on investment” approach in alumni relations. Interestingly, in this study fundraising among alumni was not reported as an issue of tension or concern, although it was mentioned by some respondents as a sign of an AR programme’s maturity and institutional expectation. At the same time, we can link an apparent focus on the return on investment concept in alumni relations to issues of legitimacy, reported by 20% of this study participants and referred to as a “lack of trust” and “need to constantly prove yourself.”

The apparent difference of concerns and priorities between this study and international surveys can possibly be attributed to the different phases of the maturity of alumni relations as a professional area, as well as to its institutional place and role within different external and internal contexts. Indeed, 50% of this study's participants are primarily concerned about their current office structure, its position within the employing institution and the level of support and trust they receive from their superiors and major stakeholders. While acknowledging that this is just one aspect of the study, some of the respondents, identified as "residents," not unlike Whitchurch's "bounded professionals" (2009), tend to focus on "structural boundaries" and "functions," while others, like "experimenters," appear to be willing and trying to reshape and push those boundaries. The latter, within the context of AR as an evolving professional area, can serve as an indication of both interest in and commitment to AR, and reinforces the findings of this study as far as the link between "experimenters" and a strong AR professional identity is concerned. Moreover, these are the very people who could have the commitment and skills to serve as champions of the AR professional identity project and tackle the complex world of future alumni relations, as discussed below.

Alumni relations' complex futures

Most research participants shared the opinion that the next five years will be critical for the development of alumni relations as a professional area in Central and Eastern European higher education. This is the time frame within which the following issues identified by respondents will have to be addressed:

- educating internal and external stakeholders about the value of alumni relations;
- getting key stakeholders involved;
- gaining institutional leadership support;
- improving internal structures and resource allocation;
- setting up a dedicated alumni relations unit;
- introducing outcome assessment, evaluation and benchmarking processes;
- providing adequate professional development opportunities and pay to AR staff.

Part of a solid AR professional identity construction is viewing the AR professional area through the prism of long-term value creation and the increasing legitimacy of the profession. Accordingly, the following "experimenters" with a pronounced AR professional identity are proposing their solutions to the challenges of developing the AR professional area. They argue for long-term planning, professional development and evaluation frameworks, as well as mitigating structural uncertainty by settling demarcation and responsibility issues within universities. These can also help deal with the multidimensional identity "strain" of AR practitioners, mainly caused by the multiple spheres of the AR staff activity, a possible conflict between long and short-term planning in alumni relations, as well as the occasionally conflicting priorities of institutions and their alumni (Section 5.2):

> "[We] have to think about Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) incorporated in our work. Within my own institution, we need a more transparent

> organisational structure, serous professional training and clear roles for alumni, fundraising offices and alumni association."
>
> (Leila)

> "Time is coming for a dedicated alumni office to be an integral part of a university […]. Perhaps, we would need to build a strong training programme and evaluate [alumni relations] based on long-term planning, to see return on investment."
>
> (Marie)

Taking it further as a real "AR champion" who thinks strategically about the profession and its role in higher education, Marie shares a vision for alumni relations as fully integrated in the fabric of educational processes:

> "I am dreaming of students who would not only be studying, but also have a fuller study and work experience, while enrolled in the university. This would make the connection between alumni and students work more effectively for the benefit of these [constituencies], as well as the university."

However, in parallel with the above-discussed potentially strong group of influencers, possessing robust AR professional identity characteristics and acting as champions for the AR professional project, another dynamic can also be identified. Being the biggest group within this respondent pool, AR practitioners hired within the last three years alarmingly often find themselves pondering moving jobs, thus leaving alumni offices to a new wave of hires who will attempt to "reinvent the wheel" of alumni

programming, due to a short institutional AR history and a lack of well-established internal AR processes. The good news may be that 44% of research participants who (conditionally) consider leaving their current employers within the next two or three years plan on staying within the alumni relations area (Section 4.1.6). This trend appears to relate to Gouldner's "cosmopolitans" (1958, 1957), who are more dedicated to their professional domain than to their employer. Yet, one has to be cautious when applying the "loyalty to professional domain" logic for alumni relations, as it is still an evolving professional area, with a somewhat weak professional knowledge base.

At the same time, AR practitioners can perhaps be better described as "portfolio professionals." Indeed, due to a wide range of AR programme tools and collaborative practices, alumni relations provide a fertile ground for the development of a rich portfolio of transferable skills. In the context of a "small office," they often have to adopt "more project-oriented approaches to their roles" (Whitchurch, 2010, p. 630) and maintain "an up-to-the-minute portfolio of experience" (Whitchurch, 2008, p. 388). Such a portfolio can primarily be "based on individual professional competences rather than on qualifications" (Musselin, 2007, p. 184). Additionally, the AR professional portfolio can have "creative profession" elements, reflecting the latest technology trends (including social media), applied within unique institutional contexts (Florida, 2002). On the one hand, this blend of roles, skills and experiences can be seen as a feature related to AR "experimenters," a group of AR practitioners identified in this study as having a strong AR identity. On the other hand, the multiplicity of roles and a very diverse repertoire of activities may be a factor contributing to the identity strain of AR practitioners, as discussed earlier.

“Learning fast, without textbooks:” professional development as a challenge for and facilitator of the AR professional identity project

Seen as part of professional knowledge base, benchmarking and assessment practices create a dynamic background that may facilitate and enrich professional learning and development opportunities. Applicable to a significant proportion of our respondents, a relatively vague picture about AR theoretical underpinnings, as well as practical application for their institutional alumni relations programme positioning can relate to an early stage of development of the alumni relations professional area within the given geographic region. Indeed, many AR staff members in this study can be placed within the general information and know-how accumulation stage, which is not focused on understanding broad alumni relations concepts and their application, but rather on the concrete building blocks of alumni relations programming, including simpler and more inexpensive tools and functions. Thus, the situation appears to inhibit a positive dynamic of the AR professional identity construction, limiting the scope of professional interest and undermining a possible long-term AR strategy by focusing on what is happening here and now. Such a somewhat short-term professional area focus and primary interest in and loyalty to the employing unit/institution is indicative of “residents,” a significant group of research participants who do not display a pronounced AR professional identity.

Related to the above, only four institutions in this study appear to invest in a relatively comprehensive AR-focused professional development. While mainly citing budget concerns, most participating institutions seem to have made attempts at using EU funding to provide professional development opportunities for their alumni

relations staff. For example, the Staff Training Mobility scheme organised within an EU funded Erasmus+ programme, has been a popular choice for many institutions. The format of most of these functions is primarily a university site visit, which has advantages and disadvantages in comparison to a professional conference or training. While some elements of “job shadowing” and the opportunity to visit individual units can be part of the Staff Training Mobility, most programmes would not be comparable to focused professional training modules or conference sessions, developed and delivered by alumni relations experts and experienced trainers. In the CEE region, a lack of robust AR professional knowledge base, as well as the scarcity of AR professional training opportunities and experienced AR practitioners may act as both a challenge inhibiting the dynamic of the AR professional identity construction and an opportunity linked to a further development and improvement in AR professional training and knowledge acquisition.

5.4.3 Implications for practice

Naturally, the individuals who gain the most from this research are those who work in alumni relations in the CEE region and whose professional identity development and growth in the field can be linked to the information emerging from this study. For instance, throughout the research process it has become apparent that some AR practitioners who have acquired useful skills and knowledge within the field still have not developed an enduring connection and motivation for a long-term commitment to the AR professional area. A significant number of research participants appeared to have conflicting thoughts about their future in alumni relations. Perhaps more concerning, for some of those who planned to continue in the AR field there was still

some uncertainty about the future of AR in their institutions. Related to this, they showed a readiness to move to a non-AR field any time. In view of this, a more nuanced understanding of the AR professional identity construction and the factors affecting it may help to create and calibrate some measures that higher education institutions within and beyond the CEE region, as well as the AR professional community as a whole can take to better immerse professionals into the field, improve staff retention, efficiency and commitment.

Importantly, institutional leaders would also gain from this research, which may improve their understanding of the professional ambiguities, concerns and dilemmas of the alumni relations function. Indeed, in times of budget tightening and efforts to improve institutional sustainability, this research highlights the need for the alumni relations area to be fairly evaluated, invested in and placed strategically to serve the long-term interests of higher education institutions and their major stakeholders. In this regard, the question may arise about the future major driving force for the AR profession. Based on this study, it is conceivable that one of the key influencer groups will be institutional leaders. In this regard, it is difficult to overestimate the role of institutional leadership in taking a long-term view on alumni relations by institutionalising and legitimising the AR function, as well as investing in and supporting AR practitioners and their professional development. At the same time, and taking a more agency-aligned angle, AR staff with a strong professional identity should be another key group of influencers. Identified in the study as “experimenters” and some “specialists,” these individuals can and do act as champions of the AR cause. In alliance with institutional leaders, they can navigate the structures, overcome identity strain, a lack of legitimacy and other challenges,

and create opportunities for their identity “project.” Moreover, a better understanding of inhibitors (e.g. identity strain) and possible facilitators (e.g. comprehensive professional development programmes) encountered by AR staff in constructing a discrete AR professional identity may help to guide further steps and measures to foster alumni relations as an evolving profession, as well as the talent acquisition and retention of AR practitioners. Ensuring that the professionals hired and working within AR offices are adequately trained, knowledgeable, trusted and invested in will be instrumental in the advancement and sustainability of institutions of higher education in the CEE region and beyond.

5.4.4 Recommendations for future research

Prior to this research, no study was done specifically related to the professional identity construct of alumni relations specialists. Therefore, this work may potentially serve as a catalyst for future research in alumni relations in general, and the professional identity of AR practitioners, in particular. Indeed, as with any research, there is always more to explore. In this thesis, some limitations are recognised (Section 1.4) and boundaries are set in order to create a manageable scope of work. Shifting these boundaries and lifting some limitations could create more opportunities for future research. Three areas can be recommended as plausible extensions of this small-scale study. Two topics could be seen as directly related to constructions of professional identity within expanded contexts, while a third one goes beyond the realm of AR professional identity, linking identity, professional knowledge base and comprehensive professional development and training.

Firstly, this research pool is limited to thirteen institutions, with five of them in Hungary and the eight in seven other CEE countries. As this study has consequently been constructed within the CEE regional context, it has been impossible to consider a particular country specific context or claim comprehensive regional coverage. Thus, on the one hand, a possible expansion of the geographic scope to include more or all countries of the CEE region is an option. On the other hand, increasing the number of participating institutions in each country could make findings more relevant to a country specific context and conceivably provide ways for comparative cross-country analysis.

Secondly, given the level of AR programme development and the reality of “a small office” in most CEE higher education institutions, a simple increase in the number of participating institutions might not be very efficient. A broader and more extensive study in its focus or perhaps with the sufficient representation of countries that have a longer history of institutionalised alumni relations, like the USA or the UK, could enable a much deeper investigation with more AR staff involved per institution. Such an enquiry could bring cross-referenced insight into comparative institutional or country specific contexts, assuming that the profession is at its various stages of maturity in different countries. It could also assist in a deeper exploration of the potential factors affecting the AR identity construction, including types of institutions, AR programme maturity, staff roles, seniority levels and experiences within the AR unit.

Finally, being in permanent transition as an evolving profession, AR appears to lack any formal course of study and/or extended training specific to it. As articulated by

the participants of this study, specific professional training and preparation deemed as required could be further explored. Understanding the diverse backgrounds of practitioners entering the field, which lacks a solid professional knowledge-base, or a holistic AR training system, could help develop a support mechanism and comprehensive professional development programmes. These could address the articulated needs of AR professionals and employing institutions, which might assist individuals to interact more effectively with the structures in which they find themselves.

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Appendix 1: Age, Seniority and Positioning of Respondents

Age	Position	HE Experience	Structural Location
30-39	Coordinator	< 5 years	Central Administration
40-49	Coordinator	11-15 years	Rectorate
40-49	Manager	< 5 years	Central Administration
20-29	Coordinator	< 5 years	Central Administration
30-39	Head	6-10 years	Central Administration
20-29	Assistant	< 5 years	Central Administration
30-39	Head	11-15 years	Central Administration
40-49	Manager	6-10 years	Central Administration
30-39	Officer	< 5 years	Central Administration
40-49	Head	< 5 years	Central Administration
30-39	Coordinator	6-10 years	Central Administration
30-39	Head	11-15 years	Central Administration
40-49	Director	6-10 years	Alumni Association
30-39	Director	< 5 years	Central Administration
50-59	Vice Rector	20 < years	Central Administration
40-49	Director	11-15 years	Alumni Association

Appendix 2: Individual Participant Profiles and Institutional Context

Name	Career Highlights	AR Positioning	Institution
Alexandra	– Experienced business marketer – Effectively deploying marketing tools to achieve alumni relations goals	– Collaborating with fundraising	– Small – Private – Young – Specialised
Beatrice	– Seasoned higher education administrator – Split between two part-time jobs – Focusing primarily on non-alumni related area	– Subordinate to PR	– State – Old – Classical
Chris	– Seasoned not-for-profit marketer – Focusing on stakeholders relationships – Enjoying “freedom to do things” in alumni relations	– Collaborating with marketing and PR	– Big – State – Classical
Daisy	– Experienced creative marketing staff – Making first steps in alumni relations	– Subordinate to communications	– Big – Old – State – Classical
Elliott	– Experienced higher education manager – Overseeing alumni relations project	– Subordinate to fundraising	– Small – Private – Young – Specialised
Felicity	– Experienced career services practitioner – Prepared to change portfolio in order to stay at the university	– Subordinate to career services	– Big – State – Specialised
Fiona	– Young junior staff, just learning basics of career services, with some AR elements – Studies part-time and interested in special education	– Subordinate to career services	– Big – State – Specialised

Gertrude	– Experienced customer services staff – Enjoys university setting	– Subordinate to career services	– Young – Private – Specialised
Grace	– Experienced corporate relations and career services practitioner	– Subordinate to career services	– Young – Private – Specialised
Holly	– Seasoned university administration staff – Loyal to her institution and superiors	– Subordinate to career services	– Big – State – Specialised
Hugo	– Former engineer and tax advisor – Appreciates “adding value” via alumni relations programmes	– Partnering with career services	– Big – State – Specialised
Isabelle	– Experienced marketing staff – Considering move to business sector	– Subordinate to marketing	– Big – Old – State – Classical
Janet	– MBA graduate – Practitioner with passion for fundraising	– Subordinate to fundraising	– State – Young – Specialised
Kevin	– Experienced PR staff – Extensive marketing experience	– Partnering with student and career services	– Big – Young – State – Specialised
Leila	– Economist and seasoned higher education manager – Founded an alumni programme as an organic extension of her multiple institutional profile	– Partnering with student and career services	– Small – Private – Young – Specialised
Marie	– Mathematician and university manager – Founded her school alumni association and piloting new ways to engage alumni with university	– Partnering with development and career services	– Small – Private – Young – Specialised

Appendix 3: Pre-interview Questionnaire

To be completed prior to taking part in the research interview. This information will be anonymised and collated to form statistical data about the group of research participants.

Name

Age (circle one) 20-29 30-39 40-49 50-59 60-69

Gender (circle one) FEMALE MALE OTHER

Current job title / role

Name of your current employer

Unit name and location

Current role/title

How many years in total in University/HE administration?

How many years in total in alumni relations?

Appendix 4: Themes Pursued in the Interview

Introduction and briefing

Careers path, current role and identity:

- bio and career details
- education, training and qualifications
- why career in university administration
- professional mission and goals
- motivational factors
- professional positioning and internal hierarchy
- physical location of the office
- decision-making and autonomy
- voice-heard
- innovation and development
- future plans

Relationships with internal stakeholders/clients:

- identification of key internal stakeholders, clients and alliances
- mission vs. reality positioning
- areas of overlap
- zones of interest and influence
- where they belong
- contribution and value creation
- conflicts and tensions

Relationships with external stakeholders/clients:

- identification of key external stakeholders, clients and alliances
- mission vs. reality positioning
- where they belong
- contribution and value creation
- conflicts and tensions

Big picture, vision, plans:

- higher education
- employing institution
- alumni relations
- professional organisations and networks
- impact

Finish

- missing items/questions
- concerns
- follow up
- confidentiality

Appendix 5: Descriptive Coding Chart

Activate
Adapt
Administrator (nature of function)
Alumni (client, relationship)
Amateur
Assessment
Attention
Attitudes
Autonomy
Aware
Belong
Benchmarking, evaluation, assessment
Boundaries (individual)
Boundaries (unit)
Bridge (metaphor)
Bureaucratic
Care
Career
Career change
Career development
Career progression
Career services
Career transition
Central
Central administration
Change
Change (self)
Change (structural)
Circumstance
Client
Comfort
Communications
Conditions
Confidence
Connect (internal, external)

Connecting
Control
Cooperation
Corporate (partners)
Cost saving
Creative
Credibility
Critical moment ("critical incidents")
Culture (internal, alumni, philanthropy)
Database
Decision
Decision (career)
Decision making
Department(s)
Developing (self)
Developing (staff)
Development (personal)
Difference
Different/no different (individual, unit, internal, external, profession)
Differentiation
Directed
Directing
Direction
Donations
Dynamic
Easy
Efficiency
Effort
Employment
Empower
Engage(d)
Evaluation
Events
Expectations (internal/external)
Expense

Experience
External
Faculty
Formal
Friendraising
Funding
Funding (cuts)
Fundraising
Future (individual, of unit, profession)
Generation gap (alumni, staff)
Good mix (projects, activities)
Helping
Ignored
Image
Influence
Influencers (external/internal)
Influences (external/internal)
Informal (culture, tradition, sharing, networks)
Interest (in the function)
Interests of (alumni, institution)
Internal partnerships, alliances
International
Invest (internal, external)
Investment
Investment (program)
Involve(d)
Job change
Laws
Leadership (changing, new, old, proactive,

supportive, understanding, open, vision)
Leading
Local
Location
Manage
Management
Managers
Mandate
Maturity (program, client)
Mismatch
Mission (individual, unit, institutional)
Motivation
Network (external/internal)
Networks
Non-academic (as a term)
Open
Operational
Opportunity
Opportunity (career)
Organise
Part of
Participate
Perception
Perception (of self, function)
Personal development
Personality
Pleasant
Policy
Power
Priorities
Priority
Proactive (individual, unit)
Professional
Professional (as name)

Profile
Progression
Prove (yourself, program, others)
Purpose (individual, unit, institutional)
Qualification
Ready
Recognition (lack of)
Recommending
Relationships
Reply
Reporting (lines)
Representative
Representative bodies
Resistance
Respect
Responsibility
Restructure
Role
Seniority
Serving
Similar (individual, unit, internal, external, profession)
Site visits
Skills
Small-shop, one-man shop, “small fish”
Social media
Society
Speciality
Stability (lack of)
Status
Status-quo (individual, unit)
Strategic thinking
Strategy
Structure (internal)
Structure (sector)
Structure(s)
Support (internal,

external)
Support staff
Supportive
System
Tension
Title
Tradition (established practice)
Understanding
Value
Value (individual, office)
Valued
Variety
Visibility (office)
Visible
Volunteer(s)
Weight
Worth

Appendix 6: Interpretive Coding Board

Critical Incidents:

- Needed funding to start AR
  - EU funds
  - Applying to a foundation
  - Issues with state budget
- No defined boundaries

Expectations:

- Like Admissions and Development, (should) bring revenue
- AR – part of Development
- Alumni support university (after 5 years?)
- Return on investment (short term) can lead to staff exit + (lack of funds and lack of promotion)
- Need to fundraise within 3-5 years or AR exit

Professional Development/Conferences:

- Site visits – 5 respondents (3 in Germany; 2 in UK)
- Courses/conferences – 2 respondents (too expensive?)
- Local conferences – 4 respondents

Benchmarking/Opinions:

- Doing well in corporate relations except fundraising
- Alumni know now about alumni office, others visit to learn
- Small information process, group sharing

My work is about:

- Managing
- Working with people
- Organising events
- Working in the office
- I am a marketing professional
- Working with students and alumni
- Working for a university
- Keeping in touch with former students and nurture relations for a better future of the university
- Working for university communications
- Deal with students and alumni

- University's alumni
- Doesn't matter – AR manager of partnerships, relationship management
- Helping students find jobs (appear not to know/use the word "alumni")
- Assisting
- Administrator
- Communicating

Personality:

- Pro-active
- Ownership
- Open
- Helping
- Work with students
- Creative
- Organic

Mission:

- Connect and promote university
- Careers focused mission/advice on careers
- Build alumni communications, emotions and attachment
- Form loyalty to school so that alumni can support
- Invest in relationships
- Develop alumni network as a "significant bank of opportunity"
- Helping alumni
- Promote university
- Help students and alumni "fly"

Leadership:

- Know what they want, but not how
- Pro-actively supporting
- (Just) support
- Engaged
- Clear vision
- He is careful with AR programs (wants to see if it works)

Nature of job:

- Interesting
- Challenging
- Space and freedom to do things

- Good mix
- Varied
- Pleasant
- Creative
- Value to others – keeps me going

Feeling of job:

- Building and developing connections
- Not much different from customer relations
- One process-holistic.
- No detailed boundaries
- Critical point now vs next 3-4 years
- It will take years, maybe decades for AR to be understood and accepted in the region

Quotes:

- “Asking for good money from good people”
- “We are mission driven people, with good communication skills”
- “Like to feel you can influence more people, educating them”
- “You try different things, new things, ideas which can be implemented”
- “I need to explain things, not force”

Appendix 7: Pattern Mapping Table

Country	Bulgaria	Croatia
Type of Institution	private	state
Founding date/age	founded in 1991	founded in 1669
Enrollment figures	1041 students	72 480 students
# of alumni	around 4000	average 3-400 members in each of the 21 alumni associations (one for each faculty)
Degree levels	Bachelor and Masters	Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral
Institutional profile	Liberal Arts College	Classical
International profile	highly international, students come from over 40 countries, no exact data available	data not available, there are 10 English language degrees
Age of alumni office	10 (guesstimate)	25 / first AMAC assembly was held in October 1990
Location of alumni office	Main campus / room 104, 1 Georgi Izmirliev Sq Blagoevgrad 2700, Bulgaria	Main campus / King Zvonimira street 8, 10000 Zagreb
# of people dealing with alumni affairs	primarily 1 + student helpers	1/2 FTE centrally (plus 21 volunteers - a faculty member in the faculties)
Is there a dedicated Alumni Office?	No, Alumni Office is part of the Development office	Sort of Yes, independent Alumni Association, supported by part-time staff, based on campus
Position of interviewee	Alumni Coordinator	General Secretary for AL Ass (1/2) and GS of Croatian Rectors' Conference (1/2)
Gender of interviewee	Female	Female
Age of interviewee	30-35	40-45
# of years in higher education	1 / since October 2014	12 / since 2002
# of years in alumni relations	1 / since October 2014	3 / since February 2012
Leadership place/role/level of support	**high level of** support for development (AR integrated) + admissions, as revenue generating	**low** (not clear), not met yet, not much direction, new Rector and Vice Rector
Direct supervisor	Director of Development	Rector of host university and President of Rectors' Conference
Mission and focus of AR	**clear** / alumni engagement with lomg-term focus on revenue generation	**vague** / to connect to alumni for them to feel responsible for raising reputation of the school
Internal perception	moderate to high, centralised, seen as part of development	low, very decentralised and lack of professionalism
Alumni perception	lower moderate, busy and passive alumni	moderate
Societal perception	low, but improving	low, but improving
Traits/skills	**communication**	**communication**
"I am …"/what I am doing	professional, helping alumni to stay in touch, nurtures relationships for better future of uni	work at a higher education institution
Something special/ feeling the job/ motivation/WHY doing it?	very **pleasant** job, which I **enjoy** a lot, feels like something **worth** doing in the future	**passionate** about the role of education / university is elite of society
AR is a profession?	yes	rather yes
Different from other prof/staff?	not sure	not sure
Local vs international alumni	mix	Local, primarily, based on academic areas, but AMAC has groups abroad
Starting from scratch?	no	almost / prior volunteers only
Staff needs	yes	yes, one part-time not enough
Operational budget needs	yes	neutral
Cooperation within	development, communications/PR and admissions	communications/PR and career services
Prof training/learning	CASE	generic national/local Higher Ed conferences
Peer benchmarking	university AR best in the country	not sure
What I miss/need/problems	missing **alumni interest t**o be involved	two **part-time jobs** with separate supervisors, alumni **affinity goes to academic** units primarily
Critical moments/incidents	realisation, at one of planning meetings, that she had advantage of being an alumna from a UK school made her confident in doing AR	getting a job at a university and entering university doors as employee, thinking of a university as elite of society (father professor), and becoming first AR staff in her university
What's next: personal (stay, conditional stay, leave)?	3-5 years in the job or more, depending on advancement possibility	shifting to non-alumni part of two jobs, due to higher chance to influence things there
What's next: AR (up, neutral, down)?	not sure	state and schools will not support AR jobs in near future
How you got this job?	sort of **purposefu**l / AR not primary purpose, but communications and family relocation /external application	sort of **purposefu**l / AR not primary purpose, but part-time nature of job and university setting / external application
Formal training and initial primary professional affiliation, prior to AR	marketing & communications	teaching languages (French & Spanish)
Alum of the school-employer (disregarding of timing)?	yes	yes

Country	Czech Republic	Estonia
Type of Institution	state	state
Founding date/age	founded in 1919	founded in 1632
Enrollment figures	43 253 students	14 500 students
# of alumni	since 1922, 179 000 students have graduated (52000 are in the database)	more than 60 000
Degree levels	Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral	73 Bachelor, 87 Masters and 35 Doctoral programs
Institutional profile	Classical	Classical
International profile	15% / 6493 international students	app. 7% / over 1000 students from 70 countries
Age of alumni office	4 / set up in 2011	5 / part-time comms staff project since 2010
Location of alumni office	Main campus / Žerotínovo us. 9, 601 77 Brno	Main campus / Ülikooli 18, room 210, 51014, Tartu, Tartumaa, Estonia
# of people dealing with alumni affairs	primarily 1 + part-timers	1
Is there a dedicated Alumni Office?	No, it is part of Public Relations office	No, alumni relations is part of the PR & Communications Unit
Position of interviewee	PR Manager	Alumni Coordinator
Gender of interviewee	Male	Female
Age of interviewee	40	25-30
# of years in higher education	1 / 1st March 2014	1 year
# of years in alumni relations	1/ 1st March 2014	1 year
Leadership place/role/level of support	moderate, fundraising direction, but not enough AR support	low support, requires lots of persuasion
Direct supervisor	Director of Marketing	Communications unit Manager
Mission and focus of AR	clear / fundraising & corporate partnerships	vague / many and none dealing with AR / framework/community with emotional attachment
Internal perception	moderate	low, but improving, some consider as extra work
Alumni perception	low, but improving	moderate, from do not care to positive
Societal perception	low, but improving	low
Traits/skills	communication	creative
"I am …"/what I am doing	alumni relations manager	university communications, advancing alumni relations
Something special/ feeling the job/ motivation/WHY doing it?	big space for my personality, I can do what I imagine	no boundaries, creative, lots of liberty do things
AR is a profession?	yes	no
Different from other prof/staff?	not sure	yes, creative and freedom to do and long term mission
Local vs international alumni	Local, primarily	Local, primarily
Starting from scratch?	no	almost
Staff needs	neutral	neutral
Operational budget needs	neutral	neutral
Cooperation within	PR/marketing, academic departments	communications/PR, careers, academic departments
Prof training/learning	Erasmus in Germany, Berlin	Erasmus in Germany, Munich
Peer benchmarking	others in the country follow our example	locally ok, but AR staff respected more in Germany
What I miss/need/problems	internal complexity of big organization and dealing with governmental agencies	trust, need to prove things all the time
Critical moments/incidents	breweries project focusing on students, got money fast, students and partners happy	requesting the funding for AR from the board and getting what asked
What's next: personal (stay, conditional stay, leave)?	stay in AR long term	potentially 3-5 years, while learning new things
What's next: AR (up, neutral, down)?	not sure	another decade needed to become part of life
How you got this job?	sort of purposeful / AR not primary purpose, but communications / external application	sort of purposeful / AR not primary purpose, but communications / external application
Formal training and initial primary professional affiliation, prior to AR	marketing & communications, (not-for-rpofit) management	marketing & communications
Alum of the school-employer (disregarding of timing)?	yes	yes

Country	Hungary	Hungary	
Type of Institution	private	state	
Founding date/age	founded in 2001	first founded in 1857, but it's current form exists since 2000	
Enrollment figures	200 students (according to Ferenc)	18 000 students	
# of alumni	around 2000 in total, with less than 100 in the association	1500 are members of the association, and there are around 5000 alumni (and current students) registered on their internal social site	
Degree levels	7 Masters and 3 PhD programs	Undergraduate, Masters and PhD (as well as Higher Education Certificates)	
Institutional profile	International Relations, Central European Studies, Comparative Law and Governance	Economics, Social Sciences, Information Technology, Liberal Arts, Teacher Training	
International profile	highly international, students come from over 25 countries, no exact data available	primarily local students, numbers are not available	
Age of alumni office	4 / set up in 2011	7 / founded in 2008, merged with the Career office in 2010	
Location of alumni office	Main campus	Main campus / 1054 Budapest, Alkotmány utca 9-11	
# of people dealing with alumni affairs	1	1 + 1/2 (not exclusively AR)	
Is there a dedicated Alumni Office?	Sort of Yes, there is an independent Alumni Association, plus there is a member of staff, part of Marketing unit who deals with alumni affairs	No, it is integrated in Career Office, which also provides services for Alumni.	
Position of interviewee	Head of Department of Services	Assistant, Careers & Alumni Office	Head of the Careers & Alumni Office
Gender of interviewee	Male	Female	Female
Age of interviewee	37	25-30	35-40
# of years in higher education	10 / since 2004 (at Andrassy since 2009)	1 / since March 2014	11 / since 2003
# of years in alumni relations	4 / since 2011	1 / since March 2014	7 / since 2008
Leadership place/role/level of support	moderate / generic support, not much strategy or resources	n/a	moderate support from dean, but have not met yet Chancellor (new formal supervisor)
Direct supervisor	Vice-Rector (Chancellor)	Head of Careers & Alumni Office	Chancellor (formally), Dean of School
Mission and focus of AR	vague / active and supportive alumni	clear / not AR focused, to help students with jobs	clear / not AR focused, to help students with jobs
Internal perception	moderate	moderate	moderate
Alumni perception	moderate	n/a	n/a
Societal perception	low	low	low, do not know what alumni means
Traits/skills	communication	communication	people skills
"I am …"/what I am doing	work with people	Assistant at Careers & Alumni Office	work in the Career Office
Something special/ feeling the job/ motivation/WHY doing it?	have a good challenge and see ideas implemented	feels good when students ask for help	like working in higher education
AR is a profession?	rather no	rather no	rather no
Different from other prof/staff?	yes, diversity of tasks and flexibility of approaches	not sure	not sure
Local vs international alumni	International, primarily	local	local
Starting from scratch?	yes	no	yes
Staff needs	yes	neutral	neutral
Operational budget needs	yes	neutral	neutral
Cooperation within	PR/marketing	career services	career services
Prof training/learning	local conference, on-campus generic training	NONE	national conferences, but primarily focusing on career services
Peer benchmarking	not sure	not sure	not sure
What I miss/need/problems	small school - same amount of papers	need more training	more leadership support
Critical moments/incidents	arrival of a new Chancellor and opportunity to be part of change	n/a	n/a
What's next: personal (stay, conditional stay, leave)?	while staying with university, alumni is just a project to finish sometime soon	maternity, finish another degree and work in education	get promotion or move to corporate relations within university
What's next: AR (up, neutral, down)?	5 more years to get trust of alumni	not sure	not sure
How you got this job?	accident / became part of portfolio, was not asked	sort of purposeful / AR not primary purpose, but work at university	accident / was offered a joint position, upon return from maternity
Formal training and initial primary professional affiliation, prior to AR	teaching languages (German)	teaching languages (Hungarian)	teaching science (Mathematics and Geography)
Alum of the school-employer (disregarding of timing)?	no	no	no

Country	Hungary		Hungary	
Type of Institution	private		state	
Founding date/age	accredited in 2000, teaching began in September 2001		founded in 1769, changing name on it's 200th Anniversary.	
Enrollment figures	7000 students (Grace said 5000 in the interview)		10 880	
# of alumni	approximately 10 000 in total (300+ followers on their Facebook and LinkedIn groups)		9000 registered in the university's alumni database (according to interview, around 1000 of these are international)	
Degree levels	Bachelor and Masters (as well as Higher Education Certificates)		Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral	
Institutional profile	Tourism, Economics, Communications, Liberal Arts		Medicine, Dentistry, Health Science, Health Service, Pharmacutical Science	
International profile	less than %5 / primarily local students		30% of enrolled students are foreigners	
Age of alumni office	3 / set up at the end of 2012		9 / founded in 2006	
Location of alumni office	Main campus		Not on main campus /very isolated 1085 Budapest, Rökk Szilárd utca 13	
# of people dealing with alumni affairs	1 + 1/2 (not exclusively AR)		2	
Is there a dedicated Alumni Office?	No, it is integrated in Career Centre, with 5 employees, with one person in charge of Alumni Affairs		Yes, the Alumni Office is part of Alumni and Career Centre (operationally separate from careers), belonging to the Operations Directorate	
Position of interviewee	External Relations Manager	Alumni Relations Officer	Head of the Alumni Office	Alumni Coordinator
Gender of interviewee	Female	Female	Male	Female
Age of interviewee	40-45	35-40	40-45	35-40
# of years in higher education	7 / since 2007	2 / since 2013	3.5 years	9 (5 years before alumni office)
# of years in alumni relations	3 / since 2012	2 / since 2013	3.5 years	4 years
Leadership place/role/level of support	low support, would like to see if AR is worth of support	n/a	moderate / generic support, not much strategy	low support, frequent changes of leadership
Direct supervisor	Career Centre Manager	Career Centre Manager	Vice Rector	Head of the Alumni Office
Mission and focus of AR	vague / to get alumni and companies involved	vague / to get alumni and companies involved	clear / build relationship and engage	vague / keeping in touch with alumni
Internal perception	moderate	moderate	moderate, expect tangible results	low
Alumni perception	low, but improving	low, but improving	low, but improving	n/a
Societal perception	low	low	low	low
Traits/skills	project management skills	energetic	communication	communication
"I am …"/what I am doing	deal with students and alumni	responsible for alumni of the university	organise events, get people together, build relationships with alumni	like social work, help alumni and organise events
Something special/ feeling the job/ motivation/WHY doing it?	good to be at private school (vs state school), have new ideas and implement them	treat alumni and employers as customers	adding value	variety and learning opportunities
AR is a profession?	rather no	rather no	yes	rather yes
Different from other prof/staff?	no, same client work	not sure	yes	not sure
Local vs international alumni	local, primarily	local, primarily	mix	mix
Starting from scratch?	yes	no	almost / separate projects only	yes
Staff needs	n/a	n/a	neutral, marketing specialist needed	n/a
Operational budget needs	yes	n/a	yes	n/a
Cooperation within	career services, marketing	career services, marketing	marketing (though formally integrated with careers)	marketing (though formally integrated with careers)
Prof training/learning	local conference, career services focused	local conference, career services focused	Erasmus visits Austria, Germany, Sweden, Denmark and local conferences	Erasmus study visits to Germany, Sweden and Portugal
Peer benchmarking	doing better than others nationally, especially state schools	not sure	doing ok	doing OK nationally and similar than other European peers
What I miss/need/problems	bigger budget	alumni interest to get involved	faculties are not much interested in what we do	dealing with academic departments
Critical moments/incidents	n/a	n/a	getting this job	n/a
What's next: personal (stay, conditional stay, leave)?	stay and continue	maybe, not sure	like it, staying for long	would like to stay long term
What's next: AR (up, neutral, down)?	not sure	not sure	critical next 3-4 years	critical years ahead, need more stability
How you got this job?	accident / was asked to include in existing portfolio	sort of purposeful / focus on university setting / external application	sort of purposeful / was invited to be part of job search, liked it and applied / external application	accident / was internally "moved" from an admin secretary
Formal training and initial primary professional affiliation, prior to AR	PR & finance	customer services	engineering, economics & taxes	customer services & sales
Alum of the school-employer (disregarding of timing)?	no	no	no	no

Country	Hungary	Latvia
Type of Institution	state	state
Founding date/age	founded in 1367, (with a different structure of course) PTE is the first Hungarian university. It's current form exists since 2000	Riga Medical Institute - 1950, in 1990 renamed to Medical Academy of Latvia, then on 13 June 2002 renamed to Riga Stradins University
Enrollment figures	more than 20 000 students	6764 students
# of alumni	19 500 in the database	n/a
Degree levels	Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral	Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral
Institutional profile	Classical	Medicine, Social Sciences & Law
International profile	app. 30% of alumni are international (according to Rita)	18% / over 1200 students from 38 countries
Age of alumni office	14 / set up in January 2001	6 / The Alumni Association was founded in 2009
Location of alumni office	Main campus	Main campus / 16 Dzirciema Street, Rīga, Latvia, LV-1007, Block G, Room 110
# of people dealing with alumni affairs	1 + part-time students and each faculty has an alumni coordinator	1
Is there a dedicated Alumni Office?	No, alumni relations is part of the Public Relations	Sort of yes, as an independent Alumni Association, based on campus
Position of interviewee	Head of External Relations	Executive Director of the RSU Alumni Association
Gender of interviewee	Female	Female
Age of interviewee	35-40	40-45
# of years in higher education	14 / since 2000	5 + 1 years, had a short AR assignment with a business school before
# of years in alumni relations	13 / since 2001	5 years
Leadership place/role/level of support	moderate / generic support, not a priority now	moderate, stable support, based on positive fundraising results, direct supervisor
Direct supervisor	Head of Marketing Department	Rector
Mission and focus of AR	clear / marketing focus on the university image promotion	clear / fundraising
Internal perception	moderate	moderate, understand that it's not core function, but fundraising helps to show results, need faculty support more
Alumni perception	lower moderate	moderate, we do useful projects
Societal perception	low, but improving	low, but improving
Traits/skills	communication	seeing big picture
"I am …"/what I am doing	marketing professional	fundraiser, "asking for good money from good people and administrate it nicely. "
Something special/ feeling the job/ motivation/WHY doing it?	like it	influence, adding value, not many people do this, feels like "jumping in cold and hot water"
AR is a profession?	rather no	no
Different from other prof/staff?	not sure	yes, we are mission driven, with long-term focus, others process focused
Local vs international alumni	mix	Local, primarily
Starting from scratch?	yes	yes
Staff needs	yes	yes
Operational budget needs	neutral	no
Cooperation within	marketing, Erasmus office	student affairs, development
Prof training/learning	Erasmus visits to Austria and Switzerland, local conferences	CASE and Erasmus, UK, Europe
Peer benchmarking	doing ok	we are doing OK, all have same problems
What I miss/need/problems	feels a small fish in a big pond	more leadership involvement, additional staff
Critical moments/incidents	during maternity leave was thinking about moving to family business, but decided to stay in AR	"Wow, they have the same problems" moment at first professional conference reassured and gave strength and framework to move on
What's next: personal (stay, conditional stay, leave)?	stay if promoted, otherwise move to private business	continue to grow within AR, not for title or salary, but for creativity and excitement, otherwise moving to business
What's next: AR (up, neutral, down)?	AR office expansion	more time is needed for sustainable results, corporates should be involved
How you got this job?	accident / became part of portfolio, was not asked	accident / proposed to take on the role
Formal training and initial primary professional affiliation, prior to AR	marketing & law	business administration
Alum of the school-employer (disregarding of timing)?	yes	no

Country	Russia	Russia
Type of Institution	state	private
Founding date/age	established in 1992	founded in 1992
Enrollment figures	22 000 students	few hundred
# of alumni	35 000 alumni in total	around 1400 in total
Degree levels	Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral	Bachelors and Masters
Institutional profile	Computer Science, Economics, Management, Communications, Media and Design, Humanities, Social Sciences, Mathematics, Law	Economics and Finance
International profile	app. 5% / over 50 countries represented	less than %5 / primarily local students
Age of alumni office	5 / The HSE Alumni Centre was established in 2010	18 years/ first part-time staff hired in 1996
Location of alumni office	Main campus	Main campus
# of people dealing with alumni affairs	2 + (some faculty based part-timers)	3 + volunteers
Is there a dedicated Alumni Office?	Yes, Centre for Alumni Affairs	Yes, Centre for Alumni Relations
Position of interviewee	Director of the Centre for Alumni Affairs	Vice Rector for Academic Students & Alumni Affairs
Gender of interviewee	Male	Female
Age of interviewee	30-35	50-55
# of years in higher education	3 years / since Feb 2012	22
# of years in alumni relations	3 years / since Feb 2012	18 years
Leadership place/role/level of support	high level of support	high level of support until recent arrival of new rector and structural admin changes
Direct supervisor	Director for Student and Alumni Affairs	Rector
Mission and focus of AR	clear / nurturing loyalty and relationship, to get alumni support the school	clear / alumni engagement
Internal perception	moderate, faculty need to be educated	moderate to high
Alumni perception	moderate, improving after 3 years, most know us	moderate to high
Societal perception	low, but improving	low, but improving
Traits/skills	good communication, similar to PR	communications
"I am …"/what I am doing	"working with alumni at a university, doing events and communications"	organizing educational process OR pro-rector for academic affairs, work students and alumni
Something special/ feeling the job/ motivation/WHY doing it?	interesting, challenging, though losing its appeal	contributing to student and alumni success
AR is a profession?	no	yes
Different from other prof/staff?	no, similar to PR	not sure
Local vs international alumni	Local, primarily	Local, primarily
Starting from scratch?	almost, 1 year after the office start	yes
Staff needs	yes	yes
Operational budget needs	no	yes
Cooperation within	corporate relations, career services	career services, student affairs
Prof training/learning	CASE, study visit to the US	EAIE, CASE, study visits to the USA
Peer benchmarking	doing ok, conceptually close to good US and UK programs	nationally strong fundraising and alumni communications
What I miss/need/problems	faculty understanding and collaboration, more personal incentives and promotion opportunities	urgent need to rethink recent changes and do some restructuring
Critical moments/incidents	realization at an evaluation meeting that challenging/interesting job is not enough to motivate	intuitively starting alumni program and then realizing its value and initial success, after an alum sharing feedback
What's next: personal (stay, conditional stay, leave)?	would like to stay, but need incentives and motivation boost	continue serving institution and main stakeholders
What's next: AR (up, neutral, down)?	AR needs more time, investment, in danger of losing experienced staff and starting again	to regain leadership support, restructure and stabilize
How you got this job?	sort of purposeful / applied to many comms & PR related ads/ external application	sort of purposeful / organic extension of professional portfolio
Formal training and initial primary professional affiliation, prior to AR	PR & economics	economics & higher education management
Alum of the school-employer (disregarding of timing)?	no	no

Country	Ukraine
Type of Institution	private
Founding date/age	founded in 1992
Enrollment figures	around 5000 students
# of alumni	app. 500-1,000 paid members / 5,000-10,000 total
Degree levels	Bachelors and Masters
Institutional profile	Business, Law, International Relations, Management, Psychology, Computer Sciences, Tourism
International profile	6% / 300 international students
Age of alumni office	8 / alumni association set up in 2007
Location of alumni office	Main campus
# of people dealing with alumni affairs	1 + volunteers
Is there a dedicated Alumni Office?	Sort of yes, as an independent Alumni Association, based on campus
Position of interviewee	Chairwoman of the Board of the KROK Alumni Association
Gender of interviewee	Female
Age of interviewee	45-50
# of years in higher education	13 years / since 2001
# of years in alumni relations	8 years
Leadership place/role/level of support	high level of support
Direct supervisor	First Pro-Rector
Mission and focus of AR	clear / "bank of opportunities" with focus on serving and connecting alumni
Internal perception	moderate, some development, marketing and career seen link important, while more cocial are not
Alumni perception	moderate to high
Societal perception	low, but improving
Traits/skills	communication
"I am …"/what I am doing	heading alumni association, connecting alumni, students and university
Something special/ feeling the job/ motivation/WHY doing it?	matches open personality, happy to help others, loves what she does
AR is a profession?	yes
Different from other prof/staff?	not sure
Local vs international alumni	Local, primarily
Starting from scratch?	yes
Staff needs	yes
Operational budget needs	neutral
Cooperation within	development, career services, marketing
Prof training/learning	Erasmus study visit to Germany, Berlin
Peer benchmarking	nationally strong
What I miss/need/problems	lack of internal recognition for AR, one person office limitations
Critical moments/incidents	getting a separate dedicated office space, after working from home
What's next: personal (stay, conditional stay, leave)?	continue serving institution and main stakeholders
What's next: AR (up, neutral, down)?	need to professionalise AR
How you got this job?	purposeful / initiated setting up an alumni associaiton
Formal training and initial primary professional affiliation, prior to AR	applied mathematics & business administration
Alum of the school-employer (disregarding of timing)?	yes

Appendix 8: Tensions & Constrains Memo

- Alumni do not perceive university as worthy or in need of their financial support
- One-person shop – personal name/brand is/isn't the same as the office brand
- Lack of recognition, interest, understanding, promotion or it is not priority
- Assessment and evaluation (how?)
- Alumni Relations vs. university vs. state/society not ready for Alumni Relations concept:
    - alumni records are required but no system in place
    - donations cannot be made easily
- Attention/effort is different for local and international alumni
- Faculty not interested, do not understand/care or not aware Alumni Relations
    - do not come to events
    - do not reply
- Lack of staff, resources, space, professional support (marketing, copy editing)
- Lack of alumni (Alumni Relations, volunteers, engagement) education/ culture/ maturity
- Changing leadership - changing direction - instability
- Tension between central Alumni Relations operation and department/school levels/coordinators/ownership – mixed records.
- "Small fish in a big pond" – complex operation – mixed ownership – university supercomplexity
- Serving alumni and/vs university interests - priority and stated values catering for the needs of all vs. $$
- Alumni Relations (long term/strategic investment) vs short term needs of the university
- Generation gap/issues between Alumni Relations staff and alumni from different years
- Vague mandate – other units dealing with alumni
- Need to constantly prove yourself

Appendix 9: Ethics Approval

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Ethics Application Form: Research Degree Students

Section 1 Project details			
a.	Project title	Constructing identities of alumni relations professionals in Central and Eastern European higher ed	
b.	Student name	Serhii Sych	
c.	Supervisor	Celia Whitchurch	
d.	Advisory committee members		
e.	Department	International & Life Long Learning	
f.	Faculty	Policy and Society	
g.	Intended research start date	1 June 2014	
h.	Intended research end date	1 June 2016	
i.	Funder (if applicable)	N/A	
j.	Funding confirmed?	N/A	
k.	Country fieldwork will be conducted in *If research to be conducted abroad please check www.fco.gov.uk* *If the FCO advice against travel a full travel risk assessment form should also be completed and submitted:* *http://intranet.ioead/ioe/cms/get.asp?cid=14460&14460_0=22640*	Hungary, Czech Republic, Russian Federation	
l.	All research projects at the Institute of Education are required to specify a professional code of ethics according to which the research will be conducted. Which organisation's research code will be used?	BERA	
m.	*If your research is based in another institution then you may be required to submit your research to that institution's ethics review process.*		
	Has this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee?	Yes ☐	No ☒ ⇨ *go to Section 2*
	External Committee Name:	Date of Approval:	

⇨ *If your project has been externally approved please go to* ***Section 9 Attachments.***

Section 2 Research Summary

Please provide an overview of your research. This can include some or all of the following: purpose of the research, aims, main research questions, research design, participants, sampling, data collection, reporting and dissemination. *It is expected that this will take approximately 200-300 words, and you may write more if you feel it is necessary.*

This research project will be based on multiple case studies focused on alumni relations specialists at institutions of higher education in the Central Eastern European region. Specifically, the study will focus on the process of professional identities construct, factors that affect this process and possible implications for the institutions of higher education, and beyond. The research will draw on the individual interviews of senior and middle level alumni relations staff as the main method of data collection, while document research and focus groups can serve as additional methods. The studies of professional identity, and more specifically ideas inspired by the fluidity of identity (Delanty, 2008; Giddens, 1991) and categories of the professional identity framework (Whitchurch, 2006; 2008a, 2008b, 2008c) will be used to interpret the empirical data, and to enhance our understanding of this under-researched group of professionals. The analysis will deal with professional identity markers for alumni relations staff, the way these markers interact with each other, as well as the factors and tensions affecting the construction of professional identity within wider institutional contexts. The study will also touch upon a bigger problematic related to the role and place of alumni relations in higher education within a given geographic region.

Section 3 Security-sensitive material

Security sensitive research includes: commissioned by the military; commissioned under an EU security call; involves the acquisition of security clearances; concerns terrorist or extreme groups.

a.	Will your project consider or encounter security-sensitive material?	Yes ☐	No ☒

⇨ *If you have answered **Yes** please give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues.***
Will you be visiting websites associated with extreme or terrorist organisations?
Will you be storing or transmitting any materials that could be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts?

Section 4 Research participants Tick all that apply

- ☐ Early years/pre-school
- ☐ Primary School age 5-11
- ☐ Secondary School age 12-16
- ☐ Young people aged 17-18
- ☐ Unknown
- ☐ Advisory/consultation groups
- ☐ No participants
- ☒ Adults *please specify below*

Admin staff of relevant universities, possibly faculty, enrolled students and alumni

Section 5 Research methods Tick all that apply

- ☒ Interviews
- ☒ Focus groups
- ☐ Questionnaire
- ☐ Action research
- ☐ Observation
- ☒ Literature review
- ☐ Controlled trial/other intervention study
- ☐ Use of personal records
- ☐ Systematic review
- ☐ Secondary data analysis
- ☐ Other, give details:

Section 6 Systematic reviews Only complete if systematic reviews will be used

a.	Will you be collecting any new data from participants?	Yes ☐	No ☐
b.	Will you be analysing any secondary data?	Yes ☐	No ☐

Section 7 Secondary data analysis Only complete if secondary data analysis will be used

a	Name of dataset/s		
b	Owner of dataset/s		
c	Are the data in the	Yes ☐	No ☐

	public domain?		*If no, do you have the owner's permission/license?* Yes ☐ No* ☐
d	Are the data anonymised?	Yes ☐	No ☐
			Do you plan to anonymise the data? Yes ☐ No* ☐
			D o you plan to use individual level data? Yes* ☐ No ☐
			Will you be linking data to individuals? Yes* ☐ No ☐
e	Are the data sensitive (DPA definition)?	Yes* ☐	No ☐
f.	Will you be conducting analysis within the remit it was originally collected for?	Yes ☐	No* ☐
			Was consent gained from participants for subsequent/future analysis? Yes ☐ No* ☐
			Was data collected prior to ethics approval process? Yes ☐ No* ☐
⇨ *If you have ticked any asterisked responses, this indicates possible increased ethical issues for your research please give further details in* ***Section 8 Ethical Issues***			

Section 8 Ethical issues

What are the ethical issues which may arise in the course of your research, and how will they be addressed?

It is important that you demonstrate your awareness of potential risks or harm that may arise as a result of your research. You should then demonstrate that you have considered ways to minimise the likelihood and impact of each potential harm that you have identified. Please be as specific as possible in describing the ethical issues you will have to address. Please consider / address ALL issues that may apply.

A minimum of 200 words is required. Less than this and your application may be returned to you.

Ethical concerns may include, but not be limited to, the following areas:

• Potentially vulnerable participants • Safeguarding/child protection • Risks to participants and/or researchers • International research • Sensitive topics • Sampling	• Informed consent • Assent • Methods • Confidentiality • Anonymity • Data storage/security • Data transfer/transmission	• Data sharing/encryption • Data documentation • Data management plan • Data protection • Reporting • Dissemination and use of findings

• Gatekeepers		

One of the criticisms of the case study method is related to the rigour of research and the potential for bias (Yin, 1994: 9-10). Both stem from the general epistemological concerns about qualitative research and recognition of the "political nature of social research - a human construction, framed and presented within a particular set of discourses (and sometimes ideologies), and conducted in a social context with certain sorts of social arrangements, involving especially funding, cognitive authority and power" (Punch, 2000: 139-140). As per Brennan and Shah (2000: 3), authors and participants of case studies, as in this case, are frequently staff members of their institutions, who, depending on their seniority, might be providing the "official position", or a "perspective reflecting their position and interests within the institution." Thus, case studies could be interpreted as a form of advocacy, influenced, for example, by the selection of research questions. In this respect, this research project might contain an element of advocacy and ethos of action research. Having said that, utilization of three main research methods, which include both institution-wide items (document research) and the different levels of staff and stakeholders involved would mitigate possible bias.

Being aware of the power-positioning of the researcher (as a senior manager from another institution), I would argue that the exploratory nature of this study and the value-neutral non-hierarchical focus of the research questions provide satisfactory grounds for conducting the research project. This is especially relevant, as the results of the research will help to better understand the issues related to professional identity and the roles of AR professionals within and beyond institutional walls, and thus would

benefit the alumni relations professional area in general.

Importantly, as part of voluntary informed consent procedure (BERA, 2011), the participants will be fully briefed about the nature of the research and will be asked to sign *permission and disclaimer forms.* They will have the right to decline to collaborate at any stage of the research. As mentioned above, the names of institutions will not be made public. While I will not be able to promise full confidentiality due to the relatively small and arguably identifiable group of individuals within each institution, the transcripts and selected interview quotes used in the research report will be anonymous. Moreover, any audio recordings of the interviews will be destroyed within a period of three years.

Section 9 Attachments Please attach the following items to this form, or explain if not attached			
a.	Information sheet and other materials to be used to inform potential participants about the research.	Yes ☒	No ☐
b.	Consent form	Yes ☒	No ☐
c.	The proposal for the project, if applicable	Yes ☒	No ☐
d.	Approval letter from external Research Ethics Committee, if applicable	Yes ☐	No ☒

N/A

Section 10 Declaration	
I confirm that to the best of my knowledge this is a full description of the ethics issues that may arise in the course of this project	
Name	*Serge L. Sych*
Date	2 May 2014

Appendix 10: Information Letter and Consent Form

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Constructing identities of alumni relations professionals in Central and Eastern European higher education

EdD thesis research project
June 2014 - June 2016

Information for interview participants.

Dear colleague, my name is Serge Sych and I am alumni relations professional at Central European University, Hungary. Thank you for considering to be interviewed for my research on alumni professionals' identities, which I am conducting for my EdD thesis in the framework of the part-time doctoral program at the University of London, Institute of Education. My main supervisor is Doctor Celia Whitchurch.

At the beginning of each interview, I will brief you on personal data protection, access to the research results and have you sign the consent form.

Although I am required for research purposes to make a tape recording of the interviews I undertake, transcripts will be stored securely in accordance with the Data Protection regulations, and the identity of those interviewed will remain anonymous both for the purposes of the thesis and any publications that arise out of it. I will request a permission of your supervisor for you to take part in the project, but no individual interview materials and your personal answers will be shared with anyone at your institution.

I hope that the findings will be of value and interest to the higher education community. I will provide respondents with a copy of individual interview transcript and copy of any published material.

The semi-structured interview and focus group will last about 60 minutes each. Below are the general themes of the interviews:

Current role and identity (bio/career details; professional mission and goals; your professional motto; future plans).

Institutional space and relationships with internal stakeholders (e.g. identification of key internal stakeholders, clients and alliances; mission vs. reality positioning).

Relationships with external stakeholders/clients (e.g. identification of key external stakeholders, clients and alliances; mission vs. reality positioning; contribution and value creation).

I hope you will enjoy being part of this research project. However, you decide if you want to take part and, even if you say 'yes' and sign the consent form, you can drop out at any time or say that you don't want to answer some questions.

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Consent form

Constructing identities of alumni relations professionals in Central and Eastern European higher education

June 2014 - June 2016

I have read the information sheet about the research. ☐ (please tick)

I agree to be interviewed ☐ (please tick)

I agree to participate in focus group ☐ (please tick)

Name _____

Signed _____ date _____

Researcher's name _____

Signed _____ date _____