

# A Proposal for a Framework for an e-Alumni Program Using SNS

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**Abstract.** In Japan, there has been some argument that many academic programs today are often inadequate from the viewpoint of practical education. However, it is difficult for universities to secure enough human resources to satisfy their students' needs with sufficient service. TUFS, or Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, also faces the same problem as other universities do in Japan. One proposed idea to help solve this problem is to exploit the collective intelligence of alumni who have considerable expertise and experience in the real world. This paper introduces TUFSS's new development of a SNS application on academic education for the purpose of improving its services. A framework of the knowledge management of participants' collective intelligence is also suggested here. This attempt proposes a general framework of SNS application on practical education of universities.

**Keywords:** SNS, Implicit knowledge, Education.

## 1 Introduction

In Japan, there has been some argument that academic programs today are often inadequate for the various practical needs of students in their education. The Japanese government has been working on this issue by providing several solutions. For example, the Central Council for Education has drafted a list of contemporary skills that university students should have when they graduate [2]. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, on the other hand, has been outlining guidelines for the needed skills, tentatively named "basic career skills"[3]. However, the realization of sufficient service for students at universities is difficult for the following reasons.

1. In general, university scholars focus on academic research, and there are few instructors who can offer the desirable, practical knowledge for students' future careers.
2. The needs for contemporary education are so diverse that it is almost impossible to provide adequate programs to cover them all.

As is the case with other universities, TUFSS has had difficulties providing services for the diverse educational demands of its students. It is here that we proposed the idea that this issue can be solved by exploiting the professional knowledge of TUFSS's alumni who already are contributing to society. The expertise of alumni is a valuable

resource to bridge the gap between the current situation at TUFS and students' needs. In order to put this idea into action, a project was initiated to make a supportive alumni network using SNS (Social Networking Service) applications for the students' practical needs. The plan, titled "Student overseas support through an e-alumni program", has been adopted as a MEXT (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) financially assisted program of 2008 under the category (or heading?), "Support program for contemporary educational needs" [1].

Though the initial purpose of the e-alumni program was to support students studying abroad, this paper is not limited to presenting TUFS's experience of creating an alumni knowledge network with SNS. The experience can be fully extended to propose a general framework of SNS applications on practical education of universities.

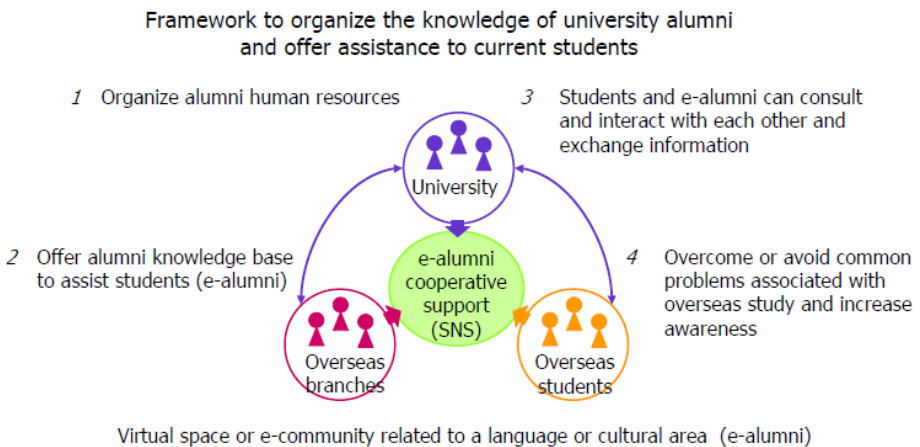
### 1.1 Background

Since TUFS's degree programs feature diverse language and culture studies, many of its students study abroad for at least a short term. Since there is a wide variety of destinations for the students' overseas studies, assistance for the students is acutely needed in addition to offering detailed information on daily life in the countries that they choose. However, it is hard to meet the needs with the limited budget and human resources TUFS has. In other words, the university's organization alone cannot cover all of the needs of its students. In this dilemma, TUFS has started the "Student overseas support through an e-alumni program". The project aims at organizing TUFS alumni's collective knowledge through Information and Communication Technology, or more specifically SNS.

The system will facilitate active communication among TUFS, its alumni and students, and enable the exchange of necessary, practical information.

### 1.2 Overview of the Project

The e-alumni program can be described as an experiment to help solve some of the issues that TUFS and most other Japanese universities have. TUFS expects SNS to be



**Fig. 1.** E-alumni project outline

applicable to the project because of the following reasons. SNS sites have been extremely popular as a means of sharing information and contents on the Internet. The idea of SNS is often associated with one of the most popular websites in Japan called Mixi. Although SNS sites are considered a kind of circle or community, they are thought to evolve into a virtual world for people who can share their expertise with people in similar fields.

There are two points that are discussed in the following sections describing our attempts to make this a successful project.

Section 2: A framework of SNS settings for an e-alumni program

Section 3: A methodology for e-alumni knowledge management

## 2 A Framework of SNS Settings for an e-Alumni Program

In the course of planning the e-alumni program, we found that an effective alumni network has to meet two needs:

1. Form identifiable specialist groups in a virtual world
2. Provide a usable ubiquitous network environment for users to share technical knowledge in their groups

These terms can be met technically, but need to give more consideration to facilitate the use of the network. The points are:

1. Organize user groups, paying careful attention to their expertise, and operate the groups successfully
2. Profile users need to contribute to intended educational purposes so that users can accept and send information effectively

### 2.1 Organizing Users

To organize users, an administrator of TUFs will be in charge of forming an SNS community. When alumni wish to make a new community, the administrator must permit and create the requested community. This is to prevent the SNS from forming

**Table 1.** User permissions

permission	University	alumni users	Students
community forming	○ (under the community guidelines for forming specialists groups)	△ (partially allowed for the purpose of alumni communications)	✕ (allowed to make a profile for himself )
invitation to community	○ (under the purpose of committing educational plans for the students)	△ (partially allowed for the purpose of alumni communications)	△ (partially allowed for the purpose of user communications)

unexpected communities which do not suit the university’s purpose of offering its students practical applications. Once the community is prepared, the applicant will take over its management.

By making a closed society shown in Table 1, users’ privacy is protected and therefore it facilitates the entry of alumni with expertise and keeps the use of the SNS secure.

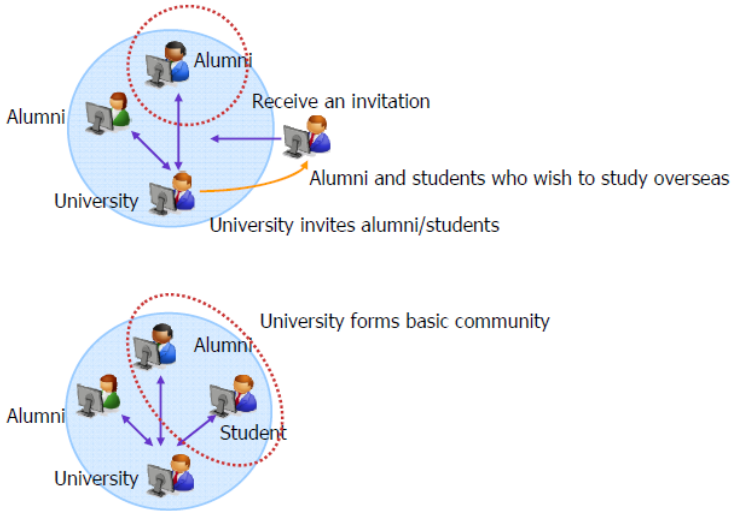


Fig. 2. Administrated community

### 2.2 User Administration

User profile information is divided into two categories, “basic information” and “registered information”. When users log in, their home will be a community selected through the use of the basic information. The registered information allows users to search any expert groups that they wish to access.

The profiles are used mainly for three types of purposes as follows:

1. To confirm the identification of the community members by each member
2. To confirm the identification of the alumni by the university
3. To confirm the identification of students by the university

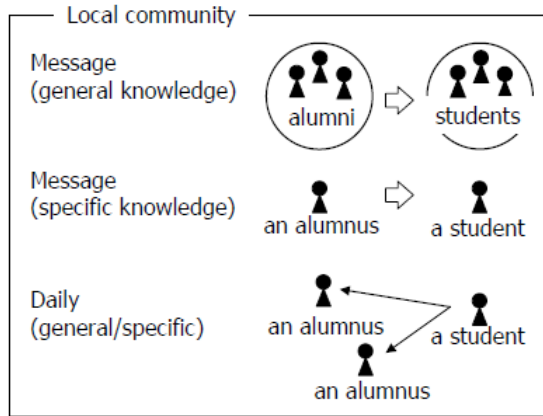
The following tables are suggested settings for the profile information and the range of disclosure (Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2.

classification	administrator		person himself		other members	
	read	write	read	write	read	write
1	○	○	○	✗	✗	✗
2	○	✗	○	○	optional	✗
3	○	✗	○	○	optional	✗

**Table 3.**

classification	range of disclosure
1	person himself and administrator
2	person himself and MY members
3	All

**Fig. 3.** Three forms of access to resources

The detailed user profiles allow users to accept and send messages efficiently among special interest groups.

Once the network has started its service, the contents that the users create themselves will become part of TUFUS's valuable educational resources. The resources will be accessed in three forms: (1) sharing information in the community, (2) exchanging information between members, and (3) browsing diaries of members mutually.

### 2.3 Operation of SNS Alumni Network

Since the network includes a large amount of personal data, a stringent operation manual will be developed. To secure adequate operation, a server will be placed in the TUFUS Information Collaboration Center. A full-time overseas study coordinator will also be posted at the center to be in charge of office matters. TUFUS plans to make a test installation of the network in mid-2009.

## 3 A Methodology for e-Alumni Knowledge Management

Along with the SNS network development, it is important to build a methodology for e-alumni knowledge management. Information provided by the alumni has to be effectively stored and has to be ready to be searched through and referenced in order to maximize the use of the expertise. To develop a usable method, two elements have to be considered: 1) to identify the features of the communities, 2) to establish the best way to categorize the knowledge so that it is suitable for the specialized communities.

### 3.1 Features of e-Alumni

Students at a specialized college like TUFs receive professional education even when they are undergraduate students. Graduates usually engage in highly-specialized work where they contribute to society in various fields. To take TUFs for instance, the Faculty of Foreign Languages has seven (or six?) courses and 26 majors where language study is the main focus. Its purpose is to train language specialists who will work in the international arena. For example, many graduates are involved in various global intellectual professions such as import-export, global sales and marketing, or supervising an overseas subsidiary with their language expertise.

### 3.2 Organizing Knowledge

Once the characteristics of the communities are defined, the next question is how to compile appropriate databases for the prospective knowledge exchanged on the SNS.

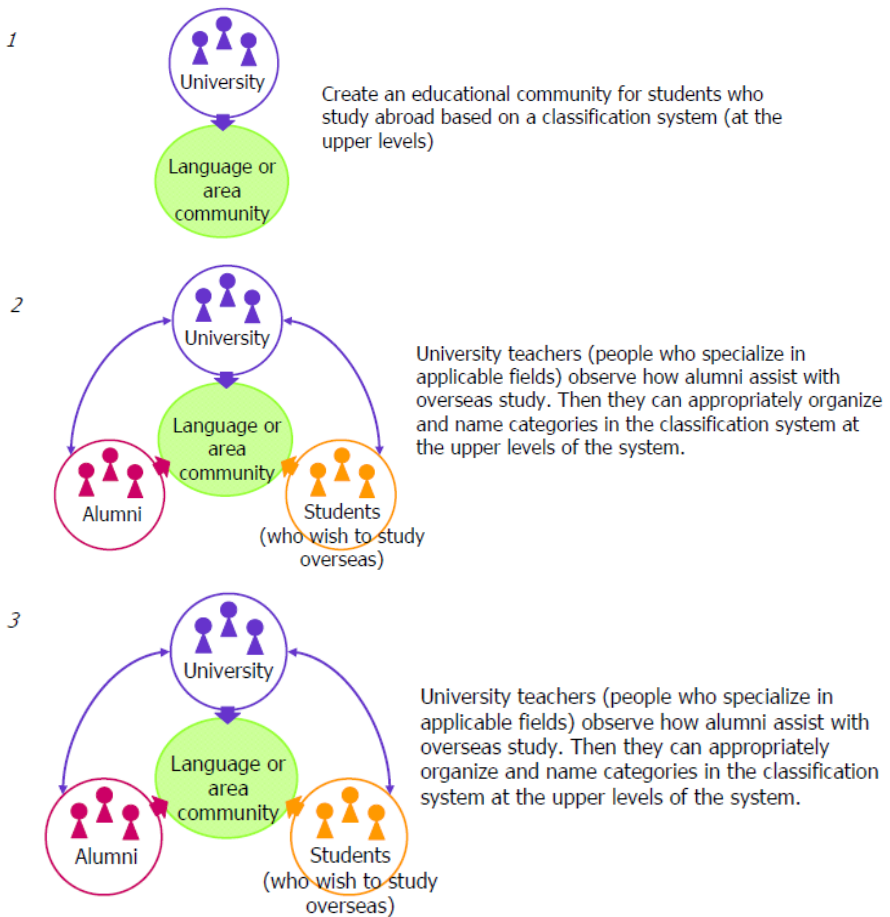


Fig. 4. Knowledge management process

The goal is to give a proper categorization of the specialized BOK, or Body of Knowledge.

In the initial stage of usage of the SNS, the users exchange their knowledge based on the provided communities and concepts as described in Section 2. Database design should be started after some period of monitoring and storing the knowledge of the users.

Since any gathered body of knowledge will exhibit some tendencies, appropriate categorization should be attempted after monitoring the stored data thoroughly by university professors. After the categorization is carried out, accordant indexes are released to the users through the top of the blog menu. Then the users will be able to follow the indexes when they post new information. The users can give the university feedback on the usability of the indexes, and the university will reform them accordingly. Through the continuous repetition of this process, the indexes will become effective enough in a few years. Actually, these indexes themselves will be a source of valuable knowledge that the university should use.

#### **4 Summary of the Process in Designing the Framework for the e-Alumni Project**

As described, this project suggests the general framework of a SNS to be used for a university alumni network. The process is summarized here again, so that the concept will be easily understood and reproducible by other universities.

1. A university forms specialized communities that connect alumni and current students following and pursuing its educational policies and goals.
2. The users exchange information through SNS features such as chat, blogging, or Q&A.
3. The university monitors and stores the knowledge for a certain period of time, and its professors categorize the data with appropriate specialized indexes. By using constant feedback and maintenance of the categorization, the indexes will gradually become more sophisticated as time advances. These indexes and the indexing process themselves will serve as unique and valuable knowledge for the university. The indexing itself forms one part of the knowledge management system that the university should value.

TUFS will execute this project this year and will experience the creative process involved in this knowledge management system. Then we can expect a specific report of the results that will reveal just how effective our proposed database will be.

#### **5 Conclusion**

This paper proposed a framework of an alumni network through SNS technologies as a means of practical education. TUFS will inspect the framework thoroughly to prove its efficiency through its actual effort in supporting students with the e-alumni program. With more elaborate observation and development of the framework, it is hoped that practical applications in university education will be improved greatly.

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