ALUMNI: A CALL TO ACTION

Could alumni associations help drive public universities? A look at how the University of Nairobi is tapping a key resource—its former students

With more than 160,000 former students, the University of Nairobi has the largest alumni in the region. For many years Kenya's largest institution of higher learning, it counts most of the country's top private and public sector leaders as former students. But until recently, many of those with the distinction of having attended the university had no way of giving back or contributing to its development.
JOHNSON IRERI,
the Executive Director of the University of Nairobi Alumni Association (UONAA).
“It is a huge resource base that we are only now starting to tap,” says Johnson Ireri, the Executive Director of the University of Nairobi Alumni Association (UONAA). Recruited from KCA University in 2012, Mr Ireri is responsible for bringing as many of these former students back to the university, this time to play an active role in its growth and development. “We have a rich pool from which to recruit members and create networks that can build this great institution.”

Former students support their former universities in a number of ways. These include endowments, donations and encouraging the organizations they work for to work with the universities. Alumni could also return to teach, counsel graduating students and to serve on advisory boards.

According to Mr Ireri, alumni networks are set to play an important role in the development and management of universities. Together with colleagues working in alumni relations in other universities, he was instrumental in lobbying for the legal recognition of alumni associations in the University Act 2012.

Consequently, universities now have a framework for a credible alumni system and the law makes it possible for the alumni to be actively engaged in the management of Universities, including the appointment of the Chancellor.

Public universities have in recent years been going through a transition. For instance, declining government financial support has forced them to seek alternative sources of funding while the rise of private universities has intensified competition for students and lecturers. They are also under pressure from employers to align their programs to the needs of industry and the labour market.

The transition has been accelerated by the new University Act 2012 which has increased requirements for transparency and accountability to stakeholders as well as greater demand for performance, the lack of resources notwithstanding. Expectations are high that strong alumni networks could help address some these challenges.

Tapping alumni
The University of Nairobi was among the first institutions to make deliberate initiatives to engage alumni. UONAA's establishment in 2005 was preceded by work done by Dr. Betty Gikonyo, a 1974 medicine alumni and a member of the University Council, who in 2004 was challenged to chair a sub-committee to explore its formation.

The Association works through discipline-based chapters and has to date launched 10 chapters. “The university's programs covers 33 disciplines and our target is to launch alumni chapters for each of them.”

Its mandate is three fold: alumni relations, fund-raising and students' mentorship. In the last eight years, says Mr Ireri, the association has supported the university in a number of ways.

It has donated over KSh9m to the University Scholarship Fund and spent over KSh10m on alumni networking forums
of the problems they face,” points out Mr Ireri adding that the the Alumni Centre is a viable project that the alumni can identify with. “It will also act as a means of pooling resources towards development activities at the university through partnerships.”

The income generated from the Centre will be used to support the University in terms of scholarships, endowments, prizes and awards, research grants and sponsorship of programs. For example, there are plans to set up a KSh1b endowment fund to boost the University Scholarship Fund.

“To meet the increasing number of needy students seeking assistance, we plan to give at least 200 scholarships each worth KSh0.5m annually. That translates to about five scholarships per college.”

UONAA has so far raised KSh50m for construction of the Alumni Centre. “We are encouraged by the response as corporate organizations and individuals have contributed or expressed their willingness to partner with us,” says Mr Ireri.

Among the first backers of the project were KPMG, Cooperative Bank, Higher Education Loans Board and Dr. Joe Wanjui, the immediate former Chancellor, who have each donated KSh1m. “I call upon all our alumni and corporate partners to partner with us in this noble project.”

The university has donated a two-acre plot worth KSh300m on Arboretum road for the project. Mr Ireri is presently working on fundraising...
for the project estimated to cost KSh1b. "We are optimistic that we will break ground this year."

For an association whose income stands at KSh52m, it seems like an ambitious project. Most former students however have a strong attachment to the university and take great pride in pointing out they went to "The University." During UONAA's launch ceremony in 2005, over KSh750,000 was raised from 75 members who registered on the spot.

By appealing to this sense of belonging and pride, UONAA hopes to reach the many senior executives who studied at the university to donate at least KSh1m. Mr Ireri says if he can successfully reach between two and five hundred such individuals and corporate organisations, it will be possible to start construction.

Most of the pre-construction work—ranging from the Environmental Assessment Report, site survey and preliminary designs—has been done by alumni who have offered their services. The architectural renders for the Centre were done by a fourth year architecture student.

"This is an excellent example of how to tap the talents and resources of alumni and friends of the University to support its quest for international distinction in quality teaching, research and service."

Recruitment

One of UONAA's key challenges is recruitment, which is lagging. Mr Ireri admits that "there is still a long way to go". Part of the problem is lack of appreciation and understanding of the role of alumni.

Universities have in the past not focused on "advancement" services and many students graduate without any idea of how and why they should continue interacting with the learning institutions.

Unsurprisingly, one of the questions that recruitment officers are asked is, "Why should I join?" This has forced UONAA to focus more on awareness creation and offering a strong value proposition.

"I don't see alumni as former students," says Mr Ireri. "I consider them social investors. Once they see how alumni membership can help them advance their personal and corporate agenda, they are more willing to join."

To accelerate recruitment, the Association is investing in a system that will make it possible for alumni to register online, make e-payments and issue them with a smart card. Also in the pipeline is digitization of alumni records.

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PROF. GEORGE MAGOHA, VC, UoN and Dr Betty Gikonyo, a university council member who have been championing the alumni network; a past academic procession.
activities."

How the best do it

Local universities have a lot to learn from their US and European counterparts. Mr Ireri, who in May spent two weeks in New York attending a workshop on “American Fundraising Model” says Presidents and Vice Chancellors of US universities spend up to three days a week meeting stakeholders including alumni to build and strengthen their partnerships.

This is one of the reasons they are able to raise substantial resources from alumni, high net worth individuals and corporate organizations.

“In the US, there are universities that raise 15% of their budgets from their alumni with individual contributions being as low as $100.”

The institutions have built elaborate systems for reaching and interacting with their alumni. Kenyan’s who have studied in overseas universities are often surprised by their high levels of continuous engagement even after graduation unlike local universities, whose relationship with their students seem to end on graduation day.

This is largely because universities were for many years fully funded by the government and paid no attention to fund raising and income generation activities. As a result, they lack the experience and structures needed to tap external resources.

But as they start to feel the impact of declining government support, rising costs, and limits on tuition fee increases, Vice Chancellors and other executives will have to become astute at fund raising to finance expansion of facilities, research, investments in technology, and recruitment and retention of talented faculty members.

They will also have to use faculties for much more than teaching and doing research.

According to one report, alumni often give back to universities because they were treated well by a particular faculty member. This makes faculty members critical to the success of fundraising and partnership building.

And because they work and interact more with students, they are in a good position to identify prospective donors, particularly from the ranks of senior students and alumni.

Mr Ireri says an alumni association’s success has a lot to do with the support it receives from a university’s top leadership. “What we have seen is that the alumni association is good at opening doors and reaching out to people. Once this is done, individuals in senior positions often expect to interact with the most senior individuals of an institution.”

This is not surprising as most high-level donors and prospects want to get to know the people to whom they are entrusting their money. They also want to feel confident in the institution’s leadership and that their donation will be appreciated and used wisely.

UONAA has set itself high goals and given its potential membership base, it will be interesting to see how successful it will be at tapping its potential.