



**LILLY FAMILY  
SCHOOL OF PHILANTHROPY**  
INDIANA UNIVERSITY

## VOICES FROM EXPERTS

### **Connections, Purpose, and Collective Impact: Lessons from Alumni Engagement in Kenya's Secondary Schools**

*Pauline Wanja, CEO, Future First Kenya*

According to a survey conducted by Ipsos MORI (2012), 78 percent of Kenyans expressed a willingness to donate to their former high schools if asked. Similarly, a 2020 study by the East Africa Philanthropy Network found that 72 percent of Kenyans polled indicated they were part of a network intending to contribute to their old high schools, with 52 percent of the respondents indicating that their lack of donations stemmed from limited knowledge about programs and platforms facilitating such contributions. Despite this reported willingness to give, data on actual contributions are highly fragmented.

Over the past twelve years, I have been actively involved with alumni networks in Kenya, particularly those associated with high schools. In this spotlight, I am sharing my experiences and offering some practical suggestions on how Kenyan universities can enhance alumni engagement and encourage philanthropy to further higher education advancement across the continent.

The spirit of communal support for education in Kenya runs deep, its roots winding back to the colonial era. As missionary schools waned and the thirst for secular education grew, communities rallied to establish independent institutions, laying the groundwork for a tradition of community efforts in funding education. This spirit found renewed expression in the post-independence era through the concept of 'Harambee,' meaning 'let's all pull together,' which emerged as a way to gather local resources from the community. Harambee aimed to promote local participation in developmental projects, such as building schools and health centers. This tradition of communal collaboration and self-reliance continues to inspire alumni-giving practices in Kenya today.

Kenya's high schools stand out for their vibrant and influential alumni communities. These communities typically emerge organically, forming loosely structured social networks fueled by nostalgia and camaraderie. However, a pattern of proactive organization is evident among national and extra-county<sup>1</sup> schools, where alumni have established formally registered networks. While reflecting a desire for more impactful engagement, these formalized structures remain deeply rooted in the spirit of shared traditions and experiences. Importantly, these organizations are typically self-organized to give back rather than motivated by school-driven initiatives.

These self-organized alumni networks, driven by shared experiences and a deep sense of responsibility, have become powerful forces for good. Their collective impact is evident in the scholarships and career mentorship opportunities they provide to current students at their alma maters. Beyond their alma maters, these networks provide crucial welfare support to fellow alumni. In recent years, recognizing the infrastructural challenges posed by growing student populations, these networks have spearheaded the construction of dormitories, ablution blocks, and multi-purpose halls, demonstrating their unwavering dedication to their alma maters.

Alumni networks in Kenya are usually registered by the Registrar of Societies. There is a growing trend of these networks establishing endowment funds. One example is the Griffin Memorial Endowment Trust (GMET), established in 2007 by the Starehe Boys' Centre and School<sup>2</sup> Alumni Association, along with the school managing committee. The endowment trust aims to raise and prudently invest resources to support the Starehe Schools indefinitely. The goal is to raise approximately USD 15 million. This is not an isolated case; various high school alumni networks are following similar paths by setting up endowments to support their alma maters.

---

<sup>1</sup> Before the introduction of the competency-based curriculum in 2017, Kenya's secondary school system followed the 8-4-4 structure. This system consisted of national, extra-county, county, sub-county, and private schools. National schools, which had boarding facilities, only admitted top performers from national primary school exams. On the other hand, sub-county schools, which were mainly day schools serving local communities, accepted students who did not meet the admission criteria for higher-tier institutions. Under this system, there were significant differences in resources, with national schools receiving more staffing and funding compared to sub-county schools.

<sup>2</sup> Starehe Boys' Center and School is a public national school in Kenya.

## ***Practical Suggestions for University Alumni Engagement***

In September 2018, Future First Kenya,<sup>3</sup> Impactrics,<sup>4</sup> Strathmore University, and the University of Nairobi hosted a conference on alumni relations. The conference aimed to foster collaboration and share best practices, and attracted 90 individuals from 20 higher education institutions. A survey conducted at the conference painted a dynamic picture of alumni engagement in Kenyan universities, revealing a spectrum of approaches and levels of development. Institutional characteristics such as size, age, technical orientation, and public or private status emerged as key factors shaping these initiatives. While a handful of universities stood out with their mature, well-structured alumni programs, the majority were still in the early stages of cultivating their engagement strategies. Older institutions demonstrated a distinct focus on shared values and goals as the cornerstone of their alumni engagement, prioritizing these over shared experiences or traditions. A consistent finding across institutions, regardless of their developmental stage, was a notable lack of alumni-student-focused programming, particularly in areas like career support, highlighting a significant opportunity for future enhancement.

Kenyan universities striving to enhance alumni engagement should look to the inspiring grassroots efforts of the country's vibrant high school alumni networks. By emulating the strong sense of community fostered within these networks, universities can cultivate deeper connections with their own alumni. Creating affinity groups based on shared interests, experiences, or goals can provide a framework for meaningful engagement, mirroring the organic and highly effective approaches seen at the high school levels. Drawing inspiration from engagement between alumni and students at high schools, universities and colleges can establish mentorship programs and alumni-led career days, fostering a continuous loop of support and engagement.

Furthermore, it's crucial to recognize that communal funding in Kenya has a long and impactful history of supporting education beyond the basic level. Initiatives like 'Harambee' have facilitated university education and even studies abroad,

---

<sup>3</sup> Future First Kenya inspires, connects, and builds the capacity of public-school alumni as relatable role models to provide mentorship, career guidance scholarship and governance support to their former schools. It is part of a global movement of organizations seeking to strengthen public education through involvement of alumni to their alma maters. For more information, visit <https://futurefirst.org.uk/> and <https://alumnikenya.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> Impactrics supports individual alumni relations programs for secondary schools, universities, and colleges, and provides fulfilling activities for alumni, which can build community for the greater good. For more information, visit <https://impactrics.com/>.

demonstrating the collective commitment to educational advancement within communities. Universities can actively document and showcase the profound impact of this community-backed funding on students, past and present. By highlighting these inspiring stories, institutions can effectively inspire more alumni to give back, fostering a culture of support that honors and extends Kenya's rich history of community-driven educational progress. This emphasis on the tangible results of alumni giving can be a powerful motivator for increased engagement.

In conclusion, Kenyan universities stand to gain immensely by looking inward to the nation's rich history of community-driven educational support to cultivate thriving alumni communities. The deep sense of commitment and engagement witnessed among high school alumni, often rooted in shared experiences and traditions, offers a compelling model. By embracing a similar community-centric approach—one that not only prioritizes shared values but also cultivates shared experiences and traditions, universities can foster a culture of engagement that extends far beyond financial contributions. This can be achieved by establishing strong alumni networks that fuel a continuous loop of support and engagement, mirroring the impactful connections seen at the high school level. Mentorship programs, alumni-led career days, and similar initiatives can provide invaluable support to current students while strengthening the alumni community's bonds. Ultimately, this multifaceted approach will enrich the lives of current and future students and contribute to the continued growth and advancement of Kenya's higher education landscape.

### **Additional Resources**

To read more about philanthropy and higher education in sub-Saharan Africa, visit <https://globalindices.indianapolis.iu.edu/index.html>.

### **Suggested Citation**

Wanja, P. (2024). *Connections, purpose, and collective impact: Lessons from alumni engagement in Kenya's secondary schools*. Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy.

### **References**

East Africa Philanthropy Network. (2020). *Strengthening local resource mobilisation through alumni*. <https://eaphilanthropynetwork.org>

Ipos MORI. (2012). *A national survey on the propensity of adult Kenyans to give back to their old schools*. <https://www.ipsos.com>