


# 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

**W**ith 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.

A close-up portrait of Johnson Ireri, a man with short-cropped hair, wearing a dark suit jacket, a light pink striped shirt, and a red tie with a dark stripe. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression.

**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 Ileri, the Executive Director of the University of Nairobi Alumni Association (UONAA). Recruited from KCA University in 2012, Mr Ileri 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 Ileri, 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 Ileri, 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

**POWER TO...**  
The immediate former UoN Chancellor Dr Joe Wanjui with VC Prof. George Magoha conferring a degree during the 2013 graduation.



**THE CENTRE...**  
The proposed Alumni Centre, to be put up at a cost of KSh1b will generate income to fund alumni activities.

and KSh2.4m on student and corporate social responsibility activities. In addition it has invested KSh50m towards the proposed Alumni Centre and renovated its offices at Kenya Science Campus among others.

Given its size and influence, UONAA could easily become a role model for other universities. Its flagship project, the proposed Alumni Centre, is providing important insights.

According to estimates, the university spends upwards of KSh200m annually on hiring of conference and hotel facilities. It also lacks a dedicated convention centre to host its widely popular public lectures and other events.

Taifa Hall, which it uses for the purpose, is used as a lecture hall by the faculty of arts. Every time there is a public lecture, the faculty's timetables are disrupted, inconveniencing thousands of students.

The alumni, too, have been feeling the strain on physical infrastructure. Currently, they do not have a place where they can meet, relax or conduct

their affairs.

### Flagship project

A multipurpose development, the Alumni Centre is conceptualized as an ultra-modern, income-generating centre with tastefully designed facilities for conferences and seminars, a hotel with restaurants and accommodation, gyms and areas for sports and other recreational activities in a serene, green environment.

The Alumni Centre will provide alumni with an environment conducive for business and social networking, mentoring of younger alumni, creating linkages between industry and the University, and for keeping members connected with their alma mater.

The Centre will also host external examiners, international students and guests on exchange programs, indoor and outdoor activities like wedding receptions as well as Association and Chapter offices, a shopping mall and banking halls among others.

"This project shows how alumni can work with their alma mater to address some

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.

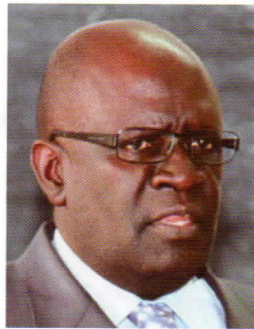
Universities have in the past not focused on “advancement” services and many students graduate without any idea of how and why they should continue interacting with the learning institutions.

Unsurprisingly, one of the

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

**I do not see alumni as former students. I consider them social investors.**



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

and revamping of the alumni information management system.

“By leveraging on technology, we will be able to reach alumni who are in and outside the country and make it easier for them to participate in our

**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

## Dips and Degrees

**Degrees and diplomas conferred by the University of Nairobi (1970-2009)**

7,062  
Diplomas

83,655  
Bachelors

2,818  
Postgraduate diplomas

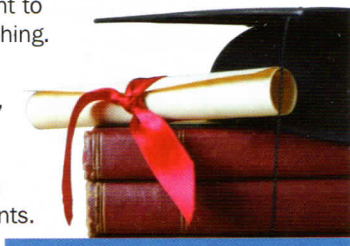
10,906  
Masters

619  
Ph.Ds

## More than one way to engage

**Wondering how to link up with your old alma mater? Providing financial support is just one to engage with your university. Engagement can be on multiple levels and include:**

- Donating regularly through the annual fund or with high-value single gifts.
- Sponsoring research, student projects or courses.
- Commissioning consultancy from academicians.
- Leaving legacies, financial as well as through personal bequests such as art, property.
- Brokering introductions to create new partnerships for the university with employers, governments and other organisations.
- Providing expert advice and guidance to the university’s leadership.
- Providing case study material, guest lectures and equipment to enhance teaching.
- Providing career advice, mentoring, placements, internships to current students.



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. ■