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An Alumni Community for Every School:
Learning from Kenya pilot programmes

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Introduction

There are currently around 75 million unemployed young people around the world, with millions more who are in unstable, unsafe and insecure jobs. Improving the quality and relevance of what children are learning in schools, to make young people more prepared and informed for the world of work is urgently needed. One way to respond to this need is to engage with former students and enable them to give back to their schools as: mentors, role models, work experience providers and donors. These alumni can help bridge the gap between school and work.

This alumni model has been working successfully in 20% of government secondary schools in the UK for five years. Research in eight countries also shows the untapped potential of this model to improve the school-to-work transition for young people around the world.

Kenya is no exception to the high levels of youth unemployment and the inequality in availability of career advice, work placements and inspiring mentoring. Up to 67% of young Kenyans are thought to be out of work each year, but there is significant untapped interest from alumni to help improve this reality. Through a national poll we found that 78% of adults across Kenya would be willing to give back to their old school if asked, but less than 1% had done so.

Responding to this need and opportunity we launched a two-year Kenyan pilot in late 2012, in partnership with The African Centre for women in ICT (ACWICT), experts in youth employability programmes. The pilot is already showing some positive results with students feeling more motivated to work hard at school and wanting more information and interaction with their former students. Teachers are finding the events useful and inspirational to their students. Learning from the first two years show the need to invest significant amounts of time with students, alumni and schools alike to get the programme up and running. This report sets out in detail more learning to inform the next stage of programming inside and outside of Kenya and to act as guidance for anyone, anywhere, interested in developing an alumni network for their school.

3 http://www.futurefirstglobal.org/data/
1. Identifying initial schools
2. Determining the type of alumni service needed in schools
3. Initial agreement with schools
4. Developing and maintaining the alumni networks
5. Working with schools and teachers
6. Running alumni events
7. Evaluating the events

Recommendations
1. Identifying initial schools

Future First Global’s mission is to enable students to transition from school to work, with a focus on creating fairer societies, providing access to relatable role models for all children. We focus on working with government secondary schools, strengthening the state education system, where students generally have less access to career advice and mentors than elite private schools.

In order to test our model as widely as possible, a wide range of schools were needed. As such fifteen pilot schools were selected from: different categories (provincial, district, national and constituency development fund); varying ages (older ones tend to have existing alumni networks); a range of boys schools, girls schools and mixed sex; across suburbs, slums and peri-urban areas; both boarding and day; and from across the economic strata.

Learning and next steps

To effectively test the model it is important to start with a diverse selection of schools but there is a need to customize events and services. The pilot only took place in Nairobi and while those programmes will continue to evolve it is also critical to test the model in non-urban areas, which Future First Global will be doing through new partnerships during 2015.
2. Determining the type of alumni service needed in schools

To inform the development of the programme in the pilot schools, baselines surveys were conducted. The aim of the baselines was to establish:

• Student’s confidence levels in succeeding in the world of work,
• Student’s current levels of interaction with people in jobs that are interesting to them,
• How students perceive the success of former students from their schools;
• What students wanted from interacting with their alumni, between: provision of work experience, career advice and mentoring.

Lessons learned and next steps

Overall the baselines showed the need for our alumni model. For example at Dandora High School the baseline showed that 68% of students lacked access to any kind of information about relevant job information. The baselines were not done across all schools because the students were not available for interviews before events in all of the schools. There were general patterns from school to school that mean that baselines may not be necessary everywhere. However, due to variances in the priorities of students and teachers from school to school, their engagement in defining success criteria and providing some baseline insight may be valuable in order to have a bespoke performance management framework for every school. The Kenya High School case study on page 10 highlights how we have tailored the model to meet specific needs of a school.

85% of Kayole South High chose career advice when ranking the services. This was the most popular service across the schools and thus the focus of a lot of the pilot programming.

The baseline survey information was discussed with the schools and played a central role in the type and focus of the programme provided.

68% of students lacked access to any kind of information about relevant job information.
3. **Initial agreement with schools**

The next step was to reach out to the schools with a sign up package for an initial one year period, this included the following services:

- Support to grow or establish an alumni community,
- A database platform to securely store all details of graduates,
- A programme of alumni career events per year, with Future First supporting in;
  - Tracking down alumni to participate,
  - Facilitating the events,
  - Lesson plans and ‘how to guides’ to help schools run their own events
- Supporting the teachers to integrate the programme with their work and school calendar.

After the first year the programme is reviewed at a school-by-school basis, then adjusted accordingly. Due to challenges in achieving punctual timing for shorter events, year two in many of the schools saw an expansion of services to include full day career events, fundraising campaigns and 1 to 1 mentoring relationship development.

**Lessons learned and next steps**

This process worked well with the more tailored packages, often developed in year two, which is why stakeholder engagement and needs analysis at an early stage is so important.

**Case Study: Alumni help fund a new library**

Future First Kenya have supported the alumni network development for Highway Secondary School for boys, in Nairobi, since 2013.

The school already had an existing alumni network which focused on fundraising but it had not been functioning very efficiently and thus little new funds were coming in through former students.

A fundraising event was organised with the alumni network, with a specific target of getting financial contributions to a new school library. The former students were very generous in their donations at the event, which raised around Ksh100,000 (£720) and enabled the school to move ahead with the new library. It also led to one alumni committing to give a monthly donation of Ksh 1000 (£7.2) which will help with the upkeep of the library.

This example shows the potential impact alumni fundraising drives can have on the education of current students, especially if they are targeted rather than open ended. We continue to support the school in their efforts to raise more funds from former students to further improve the school facilities.
4. Developing and maintaining the alumni networks

Building the alumni networks varied across each school depending on existing networks and levels of accessibility and interest of former students. A few schools had no alumni records, while others had existing networks which were being managed by alumni representatives. The support and maintenance needs varied between each network but there were some similarities across all networks.

All the pilot schools had social media pages, which worked as a first point of contact to reach out to former students. Relationships were developed with alumni who were keen to be involved by messaging, calls and then individual meetings. In turn these alumni could then reach out to other former students, and so the networks started to develop.

The networks are then mostly maintained by a main contact person from the alumni, along with Future First staff. This combination of a respected volunteer leader alongside a paid staff member seemed to work very well and led to low volunteer drop off rates and high momentum throughout the year, even when the volunteer was busy. Whilst school engagement was essential to programme implementation, it was alumni leadership and professional support that led to community creation.

Future First also offered a relationship management platform (CIVI) as part of the start-up package, which allows for regular communications with alumni giving updates on what is happening in their former school.

Lessons Learned and next steps

There is a huge potential to reach and connect with alumni on social media, this needs to be maximised as an initial outreach method before more personal relationships and more secure contact lists are developed.

Interactions with various alumni groups revealed that maintaining contact with alumni networks has been their biggest challenge. This can be improved by maintaining contact by utilizing the CIVI platform and helping to facilitate the strength of the networks.
5. Working with schools and teachers

The Future First model is a school based model, and as such is only going to be effective and sustainable with the leadership of the school governance and individual teachers.

Schools reacted differently to the initial discussion about the model, often depending on their existing level of alumni network or the state of their current career advice service. As such some schools required more information and meetings in order to sign on to the new programme. It helped if there was buy in from the principle or a school board member.

After brokering the initial relationship with a senior leadership team member at a school, that school was then asked to appoint a key contact – normally the teacher in charge of career services. Maintaining regular contact with the point person has raised some challenges due to busy schedules and technological restrictions. School visits have been critical to maintaining and improving the relationship with the school and point person, although they can take up a lot of time, especially in Nairobi, given the congestion problems in the city.

To assist smooth communications with schools, they sign up to the following:

- **Provision of contact details of a point person at the school,**
- **A commitment from the point person that they will respond to all Future First correspondence within a week,**
- **A commitment to sign up all students to the alumni community at the end of their final year of study,**
- **Where possible, any existing records of alumni to be shared with Future First for integration to the centralised alumni database platform.**

The above roles are the minimum commitment needed from a school point person. The point staff were often very busy with other responsibilities so the additional strain on their time was a constant challenge.

**Lessons Learned and Next Steps**

Developing the school relationship with the most senior members of staff helps achieve buy-in to the programme. Following up with in person visits helps to maintain moment and support for our programme. We have also learned it is critical teachers do not see this as an extra burden but rather as a service which is helping to provide the students with critical information and inspiration. It needs to be framed in a way, and indeed go on to deliver, services the school sees as essential for its students. This can be achieved through focus on mentoring for exams, progression into further education and satisfying existing careers requirements through alumni engagement.
6. Running alumni events

Initially the pilot programmes focused on the alumni centred career sessions. This was the service the baseline surveys showed students wanted the most. Such events take the form of panel discussion, followed by a questions and answer session with the students. The alumni are interviewed and prepared before the event by Future First staff.

The alumni are asked to speak about the following: themselves, their education, their jobs, their mentors and to reflect on if their lives have panned out as expected. They give a mixture of education and career information, along with personal information. The latter is critical as it is because of the similarities in background with the students that they are able to connect and thus inspire and motivate them more than people who have no ties to the students.

Lessons learned and next steps
The events need to give the students space to speak and be heard, as such the presentation section of the events must not go on too long as the students cannot interact with that section in the same way.

It is important to build off the initial event by having materials to give the students to take away and thus keep them engaged and thinking. Learning from the events and sharing this is also critical, to improve the service and to help other schools run alumni events. A lot of this information comes from the evaluation of the events.

- have materials for students to take home
- give the students space to speak
7. Evaluating the events

An evaluation is conducted after every event. The students are asked to rate how the event motivated them to work in school; how often they got to talk with people in jobs they found interesting; if hearing from alumni was helpful and to provide any other reflections or ideas on how to improve the event.

Beyond the events, evaluation of the overall model has been done through some focus groups of alumni who have taken part in some of the programmes. Feedback was sought on our style of event delivery, the mode of alumni engagement and how we could go about delivering the other aspects of the programme, such as mentoring and fundraising.

Lessons learned from evaluation data

One of the significant findings from our events has been that our events are encourage students to work harder. In Kenya High 96% of students said the event made them want to work harder. At Nembu Girls High School 97% said the same, which is critical given that nearly 75% of students from Nembu who were involved in the baseline survey were concerned about levels and pressure of school work.

The evaluations show a real interest in our model, with many students saying they want to hear more from former students. This was as high as 90% of students in Highway Secondary School, 85% at Dandora and 83% at Kenya High.

99% of teachers thought our sessions were very useful for their students. This is critical for the sustainability of the alumni engagement.

The events encouraged further engagement from many of the alumni, with 46% of the alumni signing up to support their former schools in other ways, such as mentoring and through giving donations.

Case Study: The Kenya High School

The Kenya High School is one of the oldest High Schools in Kenya. It was established in 1910 and is located in Kileleshwa, a vast suburb in Nairobi.

The Kenya High was one of the schools participating in Future First alumni engagement pilots in Nairobi. Future first set out to build on work the school is already do with alumni to build even stronger connections between former students and the school, by signing up Form 4s (the final year before graduation) to the network, tracking down old alumni and bringing them into school for career events.

The school made a special request for help in the strengthening of their career advice and mentoring services, and as such that is what the programme has focused on.

The first event, in July 2013, was designed for students to feel more confident about their time in school and to help inform them about what subjects to choose for different careers and to advice about university applications. There were eight alumni in attendance, to speak to around 600 students. The alumni included: an architect, a business woman, programme managers from charities and foundations; an engineer; a law student and a technician.

A follow up event was developed to build on the first and thus enable relationships to develop between the alumni and students. This in turns led to the development of individual mentorships develop.

The same model of an initial event and then a follow up event to develop mentoring relationships has also been done with another 500 students. We asked the students what they thought of the events and these are examples of the positive response.

96% of the students said that hearing from the alumni made them want to work ‘much harder’ in school.

83% of the students said they ‘strongly agree’ that they’d like to hear from more alumni of their school, the rest ‘agreed’.

Our work with The Kenya High School gives insight on how to work with schools with already existing alumni networks and provided opportunity to customize our programme to cater for specific request.
Recommendations

Overall there has been an excellent response to the alumni programme from all the key stakeholder groups. Students, alumni, teachers and educationalist all recognise the value of the simple idea of using alumni to support current students.

Our pilot phase has gone well and as we now start to scale up across Kenya, and beyond. We will continue reflecting on our work and look for ways to improve our impact. We start now with integrating the below recommendations into our future plans and hope the learning in this report can help other develop alumni networks for their schools.

Recommendations related to alumni

• There is a huge potential to reach and connect with alumni on social media and time needs to be allocated to this outreach in order to start the initial establishment of such networks.

• Significant time investment is needed to support alumni in order to build and maintain a sustainable network. The stronger the network the easier it is to regularly get them to give back their time and money to their former school.

• Developing fundraising campaigns that focus on specific facility, item etc is more likely to result in alumni giving financial contributions.

Recommendations related to schools and teachers

• Teachers struggle with organizing career event in schools, due to their substantive workloads. Teachers are appreciative of the support. When reaching out to schools initially it is important to be clear that alumni will reduce burden on teachers.

• Teachers are central to the success of the model, as such their feedback and suggestions on how to develop and grow the programme are critical for sustainable impact.

• Programmes need to be tailored to each school, this can only be achieved by working closely with teachers and students.

• Develop the school relationship with the most senior members of staff to helps achieve buy-in to the programme.

• Constant communication with the agreed schools focal point is critical to ensure alumni event are included in term and year school work plans.

• The plenary sessions need to be well moderated and not go on for too long, as the questions and answer part of the events are more useful and engaging for the students.

Recommendations related to students.

• Develop materials to give to students after the events to put the programme into context and spark interest for subsequent events.

• Our events encourage students to work harder and thus our model has the potential to improve learning standards. As such we call for further support for our programmes from partners, donors and the Ministry of Education in order to continue with our work, and scale up across Kenya and beyond.
“It was great to meet former students who have succeeded and have jobs I admire. It inspires me to study hard.”

Student, Dandora High School