

## The influence of the Kenya Institute of Special Education Alumni Network on its Alma Mater, 1986–2019

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### ABSTRACT

Professional advocacy, resource mobilisation, feedback, mentoring and community involvement are all ways in which alumni can have an impact on the development, stability and relevance of educational institutions. This study sought to determine the influence of Kenya Institute of Special Education (KISE) alumni on the institute between 1986 and 2019. An interpretivist historical research design was used, and the research was guided by Policy Historiography Theory and Conflict Theory. Data were collected from oral interviews, institutional records and archival materials as primary data, while secondary data provided scholarly context. Twelve research participants, comprising former students, tutors, KISE officials and education officials, were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. The methods applied in ordering and evaluating evidence were internal and external criticism, qualitative content analysis of the evidence according to themes, and triangulation between oral and documentary evidence. Results indicated that KISE alumni influenced their home institution through mobilisation to secure recognition and special duty allowances, field-based feedback, development of less expensive assistive or rehabilitative technology, indigenous technology development, advocacy to preserve KISE's institutional autonomy, and community-based rehabilitation and disability awareness. The alumni network also served as a decentralised source of information reporting new needs from schools and Educational Assessment and Resource Centres (EARCs), enabling the institute to respond to conditions such as autism and other learning needs. The study found that although KISE alumni shared their training with others, they were not merely passive recipients of it but were an essential professional, political and knowledge network that helped reinforce the institutional relevance and survival of KISE. It suggests formalising strategies for alumni involvement in curriculum review, professional advocacy, innovation, research feedback and institutional governance, while at the same time safeguarding KISE's specialised mandate.

**Keywords:** Alumni Engagement, Institutional Development, Kenya, Kenya Institute of Special Education, Professional Networks, Special Needs Education

### I. INTRODUCTION

Alumni are former students who maintain ongoing relationships with an institution after they leave. Typical opportunities for educational institutions to engage alumni include mentoring, governance, networking, philanthropy, recruitment, advocacy and community outreach. Conley (1999) demonstrated the role of alumni involvement in providing support to institutions, while Campbell and Baxter (2019) demonstrated that alumni associations could play a role in driving social change. When it comes to certain professions, the connection between an institution and the graduates of its programmes can be highly significant. In these environments, graduates bring knowledge from the school to the workplace, are exposed to new issues in practice, and are able to feed back information, resources and professional influence to their school. One such field is Special Needs Education (SNE), where teachers and other educational professionals function in different schools, assessment centres, community education programmes, as well as government agencies, where students' educational and disability needs are constantly changing.

In 1986, the Kenya Institute of Special Education (KISE) was set up to train, conduct research, develop assessments, and produce materials for learners with special needs/disabilities (Kenya Institute of Special Education, 2016). With the growth of KISE, graduates assumed important roles in various parts of Kenya: special schools and mainstream schools, Educational Assessment and Resource Centres (EARCs), county and sub-county education offices, teacher unions, and other public institutions. This geographically and professionally diverse group produced a network that extended the influence of the institute beyond the Kasarani campus.

Historical evidence demonstrates that KISE alumni did more than apply the skills that they acquired. They engaged in professional recognition, identified existing needs raised by schools and assessment centres, created assistive technologies at the local level, and interacted with communities in the delivery of community-based rehabilitation and disability awareness. In turn, their activities contributed to enrolment, curriculum and programme development, as well as institutional autonomy and public recognition of KISE.

The discussion of alumni engagement is often in terms of donations or mentorship; however, alumni engagement at KISE could be seen in a broader pattern. The alumni network was a professional pressure group, a field research network, an innovation source, and a protection mechanism for the institution. Studying this relationship historically helps in understanding the impact of graduate networks on specialised educational institutions, and the potential of an institution to learn from the graduates it has trained. This article explored the impact that KISE alumni had on their alma mater from 1986 to 2019. It emphasises professional mobilisation, input from practice, local innovation, maintenance of institutional autonomy, and community outreach. The impact of the alumni was seen as a two-way interaction: the graduates were shaped by the institute, and the act of producing graduates also helped the institute to survive and grow.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Frequent topics in the literature about alumni engagement are fundraising, mentoring, governance and institutional image. Mwangi and Njoroge (2015) linked alumni engagement with educational development, and Gannon and Maher (2012) confirmed that mentoring relationships could facilitate professional development. However, the impact of graduates is not sufficiently explained in relation to a specialised public institution like KISE, where alumni are scattered across schools, assessment centres, government institutions and professional unions.

From 1986 to 2019, changes occurred in the funding, policy, curriculum, staffing and institutional status of KISE. Its graduates, during the same period, increasingly entered the national education system. However, the contribution of this network to consolidating the institute has been under-researched. If these contributions were not documented, it would appear that the alumni were only beneficiaries of KISE and were not involved in KISE's ongoing development. The study therefore focused on how the alumni network affected and shaped the institution in terms of professional advocacy, field information, innovation, institutional protection and community involvement.

### 1.2 Research Objective

To investigate the impact of graduates of the Kenya Institute of Special Education on their alma mater.

### 1.3 Research Question

How have KISE alumni impacted their alma mater?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Review

Policy Historiography Theory, advanced by Gale (1994), provided a tool for tracking the evolution of KISE alumni influence over time. Policies are not formed in isolation, and the study explored policies concerning teacher employment, SNE allowances, institutional structures, assessment services, and teacher preparation. These arose from processes of inter-agency dialogue, dialogue with professional organisations, and dialogue with educational institutions. Therefore, the theory informed the analysis of alumni as actors in historical policy processes.

Conflict Theory complemented the historical perspective by considering competition for resources, recognition and institutional power. Conflict perspectives focus on unequal access to valued resources and group action to improve access, as Ritzer and Goodman (2004) explain. Professional recognition and institutional autonomy were the focus of KISE alumni mobilisation, and this perspective proved valuable in understanding that mobilisation. Combined, the theories enabled the study to interpret alumni activity beyond simple voluntary support. Alumni were historical actors who had the potential to shape policy, defend institutional interests, and redistribute professional opportunities. Thus, their relationship with KISE was both educational and political.

### 2.2 Empirical Review

#### 2.2.1 Alumni Engagement and Institutional Development

Alumni engagement can bring about institutional development in a number of ways. Conley (1999) associated alumni participation with institutional support and governance. An alumnus can also help build ties between a school and the broader community through the preservation of professional contacts and by becoming a representative of the school.

One of the most frequently referred to roles alumni can undertake is mentorship. Mwangi and Njoroge (2015) suggested listening to alumni whose career experiences are relevant to those of current learners, both for career advice

and motivation, because they have knowledge of the institution as well as the avenues they have taken after leaving. Nauta and Kokaly (2001) also noted the role of role models in affecting students' academic and career choices. These are functions that reinforce the social and professional capital of an institution.

Alumni also have the opportunity to become involved in decision-making within the institution. Gannon and Maher (2012) found that engagement itself can improve leadership and professional development, and Habib (2014) discussed how participation can enhance school governance and school performance. The history of the institution can be used as a basis for alumni input about programme relevance, student needs and professional expectations. Another common role is resource mobilisation. Karanja et al. (2024) analysed alumni funding initiatives and physical infrastructure provision at the secondary school level and demonstrated how organised alumni networks can add to institutional resources. While these studies tend to concentrate on funding and support, alumni influence is by no means restricted to these areas, but can also include policy advocacy, curriculum feedback and institutional protection.

### 2.2.2 Alumni as Professional and Knowledge Networks

There is a possibility that specialised alumni networks, unlike those discussed in conventional alumni studies, are able to perform certain professional functions. If graduates are in different roles within the profession, they can observe variations in job requirements and feed back their observations to the institution. For SNE, this can include new ways of identifying disability, assessment difficulties, technological developments, classroom adaptation, and gaps in teacher preparation.

Therefore, alumni involvement through staying connected can be beneficial in helping higher institutions of learning to grow, as Obeng-Ofori and Kwarteng (2021) contended. This relationship was especially significant in the KISE context since KISE graduates were employed in environments where information could be generated to inform programme review. Their experience with EARCs, special schools and mainstream schools provided a field-level knowledge base that could supplement institutional research. Employment policy and professional recognition could also be influenced by professional networks. Professionals can organise to address inequalities of reward, status or resource allocation, making Conflict Theory relevant. KISE graduates entered a job market where specialist responsibilities were not always reflected in employment structures. Together, they became part of the history of both the profession and the institution.

Campbell and Baxter (2019) examined alumni associations that advanced social change and showed that organized alumni can influence institutions and wider communities beyond routine philanthropy. Mwangi and Njoroge (2015), in a Kenyan context, linked school alumni engagement with educational development through mentoring, resource support, and continued institutional relationships. Gannon and Maher (2012) demonstrated that mentoring relationships can contribute to professional development, while Nauta and Kokaly (2001) showed that role models can shape students' academic and vocational decisions.

Karanja et al. (2024) examined alumni funding initiatives for physical infrastructure in public secondary schools in Murang'a County and found that alumni funding had a positive but limited role in infrastructure provision. These studies establish mentoring, role modelling, social change, institutional support, and resource mobilisation as important alumni functions. However, they give less attention to alumni as field-based professional knowledge networks that can feed practice-based information into curriculum review, advocate for professional recognition, and protect the autonomy of a specialised public institution such as KISE.

## 2.3 Knowledge Gap

There is evidence in the existing alumni literature regarding mentoring, fundraising, governance and institutional support. However, it does not sufficiently explain, from a historical perspective, how a specialised alumni network can affect curriculum, professional status, assistive technology, institutional autonomy and community rehabilitation. There is also sparse documentation on the bidirectional relationship between KISE and its alumni. The study addressed this gap by examining alumni influence through oral, institutional and archival information during the period 1986-2019.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design and Paradigm

The research design was historical research within an interpretivist paradigm. A historical approach was appropriate because alumni influence was expected to be a product of several decades and connected with policy, employment, institutional and SNE practice changes. Documentary evidence was examined alongside people's experiences through an interpretivist orientation that permitted their participation in these developments to be considered. Historical research included the systematic gathering, checking and interpretation of evidence about past events. The approach made it possible to capture the connection between KISE and its alumni, and changes in the nature of alumni engagement over the years.

### 3.2 Sampling Process, Participants and Sources

Primary data were gathered from archival records, KISE institutional records and oral interviews. Contextual interpretation was provided by secondary sources relating to SNE, alumni engagement, educational development and research methods. Oral evidence was corroborated by relevant Kenya National Archives files (Kenya National Archives, n.d.) and records kept by KISE (Kenya Institute of Special Education Records, 2026). The study participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling from former students, tutors, KISE officials and education officials, giving a total of twelve. Based on the nature of the study, it was decided to obtain input from people who had directly or indirectly experienced the institute and its activities. Some relevant participants were identified through earlier interviewees, making snowball sampling useful.

### 3.3 Data Collection, Evaluation and Analysis

Oral evidence on alumni influence, changes in professional practice, institutional threats, programme development and community activities was obtained through open-ended interview schedules. Documentary sources were gathered from institutional and archival records. External criticism was applied to the sources to assess authenticity, while internal criticism was used to assess their accuracy, meaning and possible bias. A qualitative analysis was conducted and the data were sorted thematically. Triangulation of evidence was used to link interview and documentary evidence. Professional mobilisation and recognition, field-based feedback, indigenous assistive technology, institutional protection and community-based rehabilitation represented the main themes. The analysis emphasised convergence between the sources, while also taking into consideration the historical context in which alumni activity occurred.

### 3.4 Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct research was granted by the university and the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation. The interviews were voluntary and informed consent was obtained. Participants were given the choice of whether their identities could be disclosed in the study. The recorded interview identifier and date were included with oral evidence used to support the findings and to show traceability to the historical evidence.

## IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Findings and Discussion

#### 4.1.1 Professional Mobilisation and Recognition of SNE Work

The first predominant type of alumni influence was professional mobilisation. Early graduates entering the teaching service were not automatically afforded a career pathway or differential position reflecting a specialised SNE career pathway. Historical evidence showed that this led to frustration, as SNE teachers were expected to perform specialised communication, behaviour support, and adaptation of learning and materials within employment structures that catered primarily for regular classroom teachers. Alumni therefore started organising within teacher unions and professional groups. Oral evidence also revealed that graduates relied on shared links and connections from the KISE platform to find other graduates, arrange meetings, and raise the issue of specialist recognition across counties. One alumna remembered that “some graduates’ specialist diplomas were not adequately respected and that eventually they had to organise themselves in groups to advocate for change in the profession”. (Interviewee INT-01, oral interview, 20 May 2026). This recollection shows how alumni converted shared professional identity into collective advocacy for specialist recognition.

Another former student said that during the course of service, the use of national teacher unions to seek SNE schemes of service and special duty allowances had grown among alumni (Interviewee INT-02, oral interview, 20 May 2026). As a result of this collective action, specialists sought recognition of their specialist responsibilities. This is consistent with Conflict Theory because the graduates were reacting to differential professional recognition, and the collective action sought to improve their position in the profession. It also had an institutional impact on KISE. As SNE grew in professional status and economic value, the qualification became more appealing to teachers. Institutional records (Kenya Institute of Special Education Records, 2026) showed growth in demand for KISE programmes associated with an explicit professional benefit as specialist training. Thus, alumni advocacy had an impact on the status of graduates as well as on the enrolment numbers of the institution.

This finding supports Campbell and Baxter (2019), who showed that alumni associations can move beyond routine support to influence wider social and institutional change. It extends that literature by demonstrating that, at KISE, alumni mobilisation was directed not only at the institution itself but also at professional recognition, schemes of service, and allowances whose effects fed back into the status and attractiveness of KISE qualifications. In this respect, the finding also goes beyond the fundraising emphasis reported by Karanja et al. (2024) by identifying professional advocacy as a form of institutional support.

#### 4.1.2 Alumni as Field-Based Sources of Curriculum Feedback

The second theme was on alumni as a decentralised source of information. KISE graduates worked in schools and in Educational Assessment and Resource Centres, with learners and families who were not necessarily well catered for in earlier training programmes. This put the alumni in a position to see new trends even before they became evident at the central institution.

*A KISE official said that at the assessment centres, alumni increasingly found children presenting needs that were not covered by the three-impairment model of visual, hearing and physical impairments. Learners with limited speech, reduced eye contact and high levels of sensory difficulties were noted, and this led to increased institutional interest in autism and related developmental needs (Interviewee INT-03, oral interview, 13 May 2026).*

*Another official indicated that feedback from the field by graduates led KISE to realise the need for restructuring and increasing its programme areas (Interviewee INT-04, oral interview, 8 May 2026).*

Institutional records (Kenya Institute of Special Education Records, 2026) suggested that thereafter the institute increased its focus on autism and other learning needs. Thus, the alumni network was a feedback mechanism between classroom and assessment experience and the curriculum. This finding adds to the traditional view of alumni. Alumni were not just mentors or donors, but also producers of knowledge. They were able to recognise changes in learners' needs because of their professional location and relay this information to the institute. As such, the relationship was two-way: KISE trained specialists, and specialists provided KISE with field expertise to help keep its programmes relevant.

The finding is consistent with Obeng-Ofori and Kwarteng (2021), who argued that alumni can contribute strategic knowledge and recommendations to their institutions, but the KISE case extends that argument by showing a historically sustained field-to-institution feedback system rooted in schools and Educational Assessment and Resource Centres. It also differs from the mentoring emphasis in Gannon and Maher (2012) and Nauta and Kokaly (2001), because the principal contribution here was curriculum intelligence rather than guidance to individual students.

#### 4.1.3 Indigenous Assistive Technology and Practical Innovation

The third theme was the creation and dissemination of assistive materials developed locally. Technology was often costly and unavailable to schools in low-income and rural areas. As a result, graduates transferred the culture of practical improvisation that they had learnt at KISE into the workplace.

*Former students described the use of locally available materials such as timber, clay, fabric, sisal and recycled materials to make tactile resources, adapted seating, sensory materials and other aids. One alumna explained this as a form of improvisation that allowed teachers to continue facilitating learning despite the unavailability of imported equipment in schools (Interviewee INT-01, oral interview, 20 May 2026). Some school settings lacked the resources needed for the task, and other materials were used instead in a similar manner, as described by another former student (Interviewee INT-05, oral interview, 20 May 2026).*

What is important are the institutional consequences, namely that these innovations extended beyond individual schools. During professional development, ideas were shared and brought back to the institute. Based on KISE records (Kenya Institute of Special Education Records, 2026), production of practical materials became an important part of its training and institutional identity. This meant that ideas flowed between graduates and KISE, as well as in the other direction.

This is consistent with the notion of knowledge use and practicality as ways of supporting institutional development through alumni engagement, not only finance. It also illustrates the impact that a specialised alumni network can have in an environment that demands professional innovation adapted to local resource limitations. This finding qualifies the common resource-mobilisation view of alumni engagement. Whereas Karanja et al. (2024) examined alumni support mainly through funding for physical infrastructure, the KISE evidence shows that alumni could also contribute non-financial resources by adapting materials, generating practical innovations, and returning those ideas to the institute. It therefore extends Obeng-Ofori and Kwarteng (2021) by identifying locally produced professional knowledge as a material contribution to institutional development.

#### 4.1.4 Protection of KISE's Institutional Autonomy

The study also revealed that when KISE's position was perceived to be under threat, the alumni formed a protective network around it. Historical evidence showed that proposals to merge or incorporate specialised institutions into larger state institutions were a recurring concern because of possible loss of mandate, funding and professional focus.

*By the 2010s, some KISE graduates had established themselves in the civil service, education administration, unions, Parliament and the media. This gave the alumni network influence beyond the*

*classroom. Interviewee INT-04 (oral interview, 13 May 2026) indicated that on occasions when there were merger scenarios or institutional restructuring, alumni mobilised to safeguard KISE's independent role.*

Additionally, institutional records (Kenya Institute of Special Education Records, 2026) revealed that alumni advocacy was connected with public discussion concerning KISE's particular activities and the impact of any downgrade. As an external constituency, the network could therefore make the decision-making process more transparent and challenge administrative direction affecting the institute.

Both theories may be applied to this role. Policy Historiography Theory emphasises the roles of negotiation between actors over time in the creation of institutional arrangements. Conflict Theory focuses on contests for resources, authority and organisational survival. KISE graduates were able to engage in these conflicts because their professional success had placed them in key positions within the education system. The finding supports Campbell and Baxter (2019) on the capacity of alumni associations to influence policy and social change, but it extends that perspective to institutional survival. In the KISE case, professional location gave alumni the leverage to defend the specialised mandate of their alma mater, showing that alumni influence could operate as political and institutional protection rather than only philanthropy, mentoring, or governance participation.

#### **4.1.5 Community-Based Rehabilitation and Public Advocacy**

The fifth theme centred on graduates' contribution to community-based rehabilitation and disability awareness. Graduates did not restrict their activities to schools. Some were involved in community meetings, churches, local administration and assessment activities, and oral evidence showed that they challenged stigma and encouraged families to seek education and support for children with disabilities.

An alumna explained how, after training, alumni engaged in community education campaigns and worked with community leaders to change attitudes and improve disability awareness, as well as teaching resource-sharing models that were available at low cost (Interviewee INT-01, oral interview, 20 May 2026). This work contributed to the visibility of KISE, as members of the community came into contact with the institute through the work of its graduates, not just through the Kasarani campus. There was also support for the institute's mission through community engagement. Through their participation in identification, assessment, referral and family awareness, alumni significantly expanded the actual network of SNE. Thus, institutional training was connected with community change. This was especially crucial where stigma, geography and lack of services could deter families from seeking formal services.

The finding confirms a general pattern in alumni literature, which proposes that graduates can represent their institutions. In this case, ambassadorship involved a substantive professional role. SNE alumni were able to influence changes in community practices with the knowledge they developed through SNE, and the visibility of SNE graduates helped promote the reputation of KISE. This finding agrees with Mwangi and Njoroge (2015), who linked alumni participation to school development and community-facing support, and with Campbell and Baxter (2019), who showed that alumni associations can pursue social change. It extends both by showing that, for a specialised institution, alumni ambassadorship was inseparable from professional disability advocacy, community-based rehabilitation, identification, referral, and public awareness.

The findings revealed that the impact of KISE alumni on the institution was multidimensional. Alumni contributed to professional recognition, curriculum feedback, assistive technology, institutional protection and community engagement. These functions interacted. Field feedback and innovation kept programmes relevant, while greater professional recognition made SNE qualifications more attractive. Institutional protection helped preserve the specialised platform from which further training and research could continue. The results also extend the definition of "alumni engagement." Conley (1999) and Campbell and Baxter (2019) pointed to alumni support and social change, while Mwangi and Njoroge (2015) addressed mentoring and educational development. The KISE case extends these functions to professional advocacy and field-based curriculum intelligence. Alumni were incorporated into the institution's ability to learn from practice.

Across the themes, the findings both support and extend the reviewed alumni literature. Conley (1999), Mwangi and Njoroge (2015), Gannon and Maher (2012), Nauta and Kokaly (2001), and Karanja et al. (2024) emphasised giving, mentoring, governance, role modelling, and material support. The KISE evidence adds professional advocacy, field-based curriculum intelligence, indigenous assistive-technology innovation, protection of institutional autonomy, and disability-focused community action. The historical contribution is therefore to show that alumni influence in a specialised public institution can be professional, political, and knowledge-based as well as financial or relational.

Policy Historiography Theory can facilitate the explanation of alumni influence at specific historical moments. As more alumni graduated and moved into roles throughout the education system, their influence expanded. Conflict Theory can be used to understand the reasons for collective organisation related to professional recognition and institutional autonomy. In both instances, this was related to the status of individual alumni and their social and institutional location after their departure from KISE. This relationship was mutual. KISE facilitated training, professional identities and networks. Those resources were in turn utilised by graduates to improve their professional

lives, share new information and defend the institution. This produced a self-reinforcing process: institutional development reinforced the alumni network, while the alumni network reinforced institutional development.

## V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusion

From 1986 to 2019, the alumni network of the Kenya Institute of Special Education played a significant role in the growth and survival of the institution. Graduates were not merely passive recipients of education. They grew to become sources of information, innovators, advocates, protectors of institutional independence, and community-based stakeholders in SNE. They helped secure recognition of specialist SNE work and made the field more appealing to teachers. Through their involvement in schools and assessment centres, this flow of information enabled KISE to identify new needs and review programmes. Their local innovations made it possible to rely on cheaper, locally available assistive materials, and their advocacy helped safeguard the institute's specialised mandate. Increased public relevance through community outreach further supported the work of KISE.

From the results, it can be concluded that, when linked to professional practice and organised networks, alumni engagement can be a significant institutional asset. The greatest contribution an alumnus can make to a specialised educational institution might not be financial. It may involve knowledge, legitimacy, advocacy, innovation and ongoing relationships with the communities the institution serves.

### 5.2 Recommendations

The role of alumni needs to be made more prominent in curriculum review, programme assessment and development activities at KISE. Existing networks for feedback from schools, EARCs and other county education systems that have access to children should be strengthened to allow reporting of new learner needs, practices and implementation issues. This would reinforce the field-to-institution feedback mechanism highlighted by the historical evidence. Organised alumni innovation platforms should also be strengthened at the institute. Assistive materials and teaching aids developed by graduates for use in lessons should be recorded and evaluated in terms of their availability and usability and, where necessary, improved and shared with others at low cost. It may be possible to establish a formal innovation and fabrication network linking school-level creativity with the research and material-production functions of KISE.

The conversation on the professional conditions of SNE teachers should continue between the Teachers Service Commission (TSC), teachers' unions and KISE alumni networks. Recognition, career progression and appropriate support remain important for attracting qualified personnel into specialised education. Evidence drawn from practice can be provided through the work of alumni organisations rather than individual advocacy. Lastly, KISE should foster intergovernmental relations (IGR) and community engagement/public advocacy through a strong, independent alumni association. Alumni engagement should complement, not substitute for, formal institutional leadership. The goal should be for KISE to retain its specialisation so that it can serve people with special needs, enhance its responsiveness to practice, and ensure that knowledge produced through its graduates continues to shape the future of Special Needs Education in Kenya.

### Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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