



Staying connected

Kim Renfrew explores the different ways that independent schools are building and maintaining powerful alumni associations, and the benefits they bring to people of all ages

The UK's 2,500 independent schools educate over half a million pupils at any one time. Students, past and present, are the cement that binds a school together and the means of conveying their school's traditions and culture into the wider world.

Utilising the resources inherent in former pupils has met with unprecedented challenges over the last 18 months, with two-thirds of respondents to June 2020's survey of UK independent schools by Marts & Lundy furloughing some or all development and alumni staff. And, with the ISC reporting declining pupil

ABOVE: Alumni reunion at Bolton School in 2019

numbers for the first time in a decade, bringing alumni into a school's development journey is more vital than ever.

CONTINUITY KEY

Central to creating a network that's durable and meaningful to all members is fostering a sense of belonging that lasts the life cycle. Such continuity is vital for Bedford School, which likes to remind Old Boys that "when they leave, they're joining a club that they can be part of until the day they die", says Hugh Maltby, director

of the Bedford School Association.

Amanda Lovejoy, development manager at Bryanston School in Dorset, sees alumni relations as akin to a village: "A village will support each other. The younger people will look after the older people, older people share their knowledge and wisdom. The stronger and more self-supporting we are, the better."

Maintaining tradition also means fostering that kernel of experience all old members share. Laura Firth, director of development and alumni relations at Bolton School, says: "We remind people that the ethos of the school has endured through the decades: school is fundamentally the same as it was then. Yes, the children have →

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ABOVE: Bryanston pupils, past and present, compete in the annual cross-country run

iPads now, for example, but the atmosphere of the school and the characters of the children it educates are fundamentally the same as during their time here.”

TEACHERS AND PARENTS: PART OF THE STORY, TOO

Strength in depth also ensures bonds between alma mater and alumni are kept tight. One way to achieve this is thinking outside the box: are alumni solely ex-pupils or a broader network? For Bolton School, it's definitively the latter, with past teachers in the frame. “We count former staff as part of the alumni network,” says Firth. A benefit of including teachers is their bridging role between Old Boys and Girls and what could, potentially, be a faceless development office.

“[Ex-pupils] don't know who I am but they certainly know who coached their sports team or helped them to secure their

“The pandemic made people realise even more how the direct grant or assisted place they received changed the direction of their lives and how it's more important than ever that as many children as possible have that same opportunity”

university place and remember them fondly.” By drawing their students back into the fold, teachers therefore assist the development office's role. Former teachers also came into their own during lockdown, when Bolton asked them to post sports dream teams of past pupils on social media, creating considerable engagement: alumni shared archive material, photos and memories, thereby helping document more of the school's history.

At Bedford School, parents are part of the network and even have their own membership organisation.

Maldby is keen to emphasise to parents

that “the last school fee cheque you pay doesn't mean the end of your connection with the school. We very much value their continued support for the school.” Therefore, the Past Parents Association hosts its own events and publishes bulletins to keep those connections flourishing.

PAY IT FORWARD

Often, alumni want to repay the institution that shaped them. Sometimes, this takes the form of sending their own children, teaching there, or becoming governors. Lovejoy observes that alumni “are our



ABOVE: Old Bedfordian Edwin Carvell opens a card for his 100th birthday from Bedford School
 TOP LEFT: Edwin Carvell (circled) in the Officer Training Corps at Bedford School in the 1930s
 LEFT: Former pupil Sir Terence Conran delivering a talk on design at Bryanston School in 2017

best ambassadors. We want them to tell everyone what a great school it is... we want them to stay stakeholders."

Another way of continuing involvement at Bryanston School, which has a formidable creative reputation, is through former students sharing expertise with current ones; actor Freddie Fox regularly hosts drama masterclasses as part of Bryanston's careers day, while in 2017, design guru, the late Sir Terence Conran, gave a hands-on lecture about design at an event that was open to other schools in the local community.

Giving back can also be seen in the way the culture instilled in pupils is harnessed later to assist each other. Lovejoy describes how robust alumni links perpetuate the school's ethos of independence and entrepreneurialism.

Some young alumni who'd attended Bryanston's annual business conference approached Lovejoy after university, adamant they only wanted to work for themselves but with an idea they were

unsure how to develop. Lovejoy plugged into Bryanston's alumni network to find a mentor.

The result was award-winning property business Bunk, which now employs 15 people. "That's all from independent thinking and OBs coming back in at all different stages and helping them figure it out."

RAISING FUNDS

Donations are perhaps the most measurable aspect of effective alumni networks: most schools participating in the IDPE's 2018 report into fundraising and engagement, for example, received annual philanthropic incomes of £100,000–£499,000.

Maldby notes that much of Bedford School's 50-acre estate has been funded by Old Bedfordians, including the new sculpture studio and Quarry Theatre. As well as major gifts, smaller-scale, fun fundraisers make a difference: an online draw last March raised £9,000 for improvements to the school's strength and conditioning facilities.

Fundraising's role has been foregrounded

by the pandemic, with increasing numbers of pupils requiring bursary support, according to the ISC's 2021 census.

This is significant for Bolton School, which has a proud history of acting as a vehicle for social mobility and where one in five pupils currently has a bursary place.

Firth has witnessed Old Boys and Girls keeping what she calls the "virtuous circle" going by donating to their bursary fund: "The pandemic made people realise even more how the direct grant or assisted place they received changed the direction of their lives and how it's more important than ever that as many children as possible have that same opportunity."

ADAPT TO SURVIVE

The pandemic cast a shadow over the past 18 months. A chink of light, however, is seen in the ways alumni networks rallied to guide their schools through the dark times. It revealed that every former student has something to contribute – even younger old members. For example, at Bolton last summer, recent leavers leapt into the breach by recording support videos and holding online pre-university sessions for Year 13s whose exams had been cancelled, and sharing experiences of courses and campuses with Year 12s who couldn't tour universities.

Lovejoy was also amazed by the outpouring of support at Bryanston, where she worked with the head of sixth form to

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ABOVE: Alumnae at Bolton School's International Women's Day event in 2019
RIGHT: An alumni workshop at Bryanston School's annual business conference

encourage alumni currently at university to send in videos and selfies to worried pupils, swapping messages of support and sharing what their courses were like.

At Bedford School, the switchover from physical to digital also meant that there was an uptick in involvement from international alumni. When the annual careers fair moved online, Maltby was able to engage speakers round the world, with one participating from New Zealand. "Ordinarily, you're not going to fly from Wellington to take part in a careers fair. I think technology and the help and support of the alumni worked really well together," he says.

Technology's ability to involve far-flung alumni in ways that hadn't been considered before was also felt at Bryanston.

"How we can leverage our diaspora was the big thing to come out of Covid," says Lovejoy.

FORGING CONNECTIONS ON A HUMAN SCALE

Although enhancing reach and membership numbers in any alumni network is crucial – Bolton School's network currently numbers 11,000, while there are 6,000



in the Old Bedfordian Club – recognising the impact alumni can have on the macro level is also important. Lovejoy recalls a moment when an alumna found themselves temporarily homeless because their student accommodation had fallen through. She put out a call to Old Bryanstonians and within hours the student was rehoused. "It's those things I love, the humanity of it, people looking out for each other and that's what I really want our alumni network to be," she says.

It's also never too late to get involved

again, as Maltby illustrates. He read a newspaper article about Edwin Carvell's 100th birthday, which mentioned he'd attended Bedford. School records revealed they lost contact with him in 1937, so they sent him a card reading "Happy 100th birthday – sorry we haven't been in touch for 84 years!" and have invited him in for lunch with the headmaster this September. "That's an example of where we're there for someone their whole life – even if we've lost contact with someone, if we have an opportunity to reconnect then we will do that." ■