

1

Immersion into University Leadership

It happened on a day like any other in 1989. There were precise things I looked forward to that day, but the heralds I was about to receive were not part of them. Presently, the phone rang and, from the other end, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Nairobi, requested me to come to his office for some unspecified consultation. It was after I got there that he informed me of the decision by the Chancellor and President of the Republic of Kenya to appoint me the Deputy Principal (Academic) for Jomo Kenyatta College of Agriculture and Technology (JKUCAT), then a constituent college of Kenyatta University. The Vice-Chancellor followed this with a piece of advice on why I needed to accept the appointment. Nevertheless, he still gave me some time to reflect on it, as was the practice then regarding appointments to senior university administrative positions.

I left his office with a heavier load on my mind than when I came in. But, in the end, I did accept the appointment and with that singular decision, I set myself on a career path that I had neither envisioned when I joined the academic community nor been prepared for. For the next thirteen years, I had plenty of experience to learn on the job in order to strengthen the foundations of what later became Kenya's fifth public university. I had no choice because I was determined to make a difference as the founding Vice-Chancellor of this budding institution.

This was, however, during one of the most turbulent periods in Kenya's higher education history. When Kenya attained independence in 1963, it inherited a university education system that consisted of one University College (Nairobi), then a constituent college of the University of East Africa with an enrolment of 602 students. The pressure to expand the university system to produce the workforce required for the socio-economic development of the country started to be felt immediately thereafter. The government established the University of Nairobi as a public university in 1970, and in the course of the third decade of independence, three other public universities were established, namely, Moi University in 1984, Kenyatta University in 1985, and Egerton University in 1987. Towards the end of the 1980s, the rapid expansion in the tertiary education sub-

sector had begun to tell seriously on the nation's finances owing to government's financial limitations. The trend had set in since 1974 when government introduced a university student loan scheme designed to form a revolving fund from which those who qualified and were admitted to university would benefit. However over the years, recovery of the loans from past beneficiaries was very inefficient and the original purpose was defeated. Towards the end of the 1980s, therefore, the government found itself facing immense pressure to expand university education in the midst of economic austerity.

With pressure from donors and resistance from students and parents, the government, through Sessional Paper No. 6 of 1988 on '*Education and Manpower Training for the Next Decade and Beyond*' (Kamunge Report) proposed a reduction of student allowances. The paper also recommended that the loan scheme be continued but managed by a commercial bank in order to improve recovery. From 1988 to 1991, the government tried to implement the various proposals with so much resistance from students, leading to institutional closures and sometimes violent confrontations between the police and students that resulted in loss of lives. The burden of implementing the various government decisions regarding funding university education fell on university leaders. Given the nature of appointment to university leadership then, which was highly politicized, and with the president still the chancellor, a university leadership that failed to contain student riots and successfully implement the reforms would be interpreted as sabotaging government policy and being lukewarm in its support for the political establishment. This is the context within which I was being immersed into university leadership. On the one hand, and as deputy principal, I had the task of developing the academic programmes of the college and successfully navigating it to attain full university status. But, on the other hand, the broad issues of funding and the subsequent student riots tested our mettle as university administrators.

The above scenario did not help the political mood in the country then. The 1989-1993 period witnessed heightened political activities in the country that eventually forced the political leadership to give in to the demands for political pluralism. Any resistance or demands from students and academics for better funding of the universities was usually dismissed casually by politicians as the work of external forces or political saboteurs. This was the case with the student riots, and the Kenyan media then carried headlines that castigated the students as unpatriotic and being influenced by foreigners. For example, the *Kenya Times*, a newspaper owned by the then ruling party, in its issue of Monday, 8 July 1991 had a headline, '*Foreigners instigated varsity rioting – Ndoto*'. Similar headlines were in the Standard newspaper such as, 'House hits at students' (Standard, 4 July 1991); '*Students should apologize*' (Standard, Sunday, 7 July 1991); 'Don't incite students' (Standard, 11 July 1991). I had not anticipated such scenarios nor did I envisage I was going to be dealing with student riots this early in my career.

After completing my doctoral studies, my first engagement was with the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) in Ibadan, Nigeria, as a researcher. The persuasion of colleagues from the University of Nairobi to join the Faculty of Agriculture as a lecturer in the Department of Crop Science promised me a career in university teaching and research, but not administration. Hence, to succeed as an administrator, I had to rely on the basics of administration I had learned in my earlier life, my sheer willingness to learn on the job and my determination to succeed.

My second major assignment as the Director-General, National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) was not an easy task either. The transition from academia to a heavily-controlled government parastatal was not an easy task. Transforming the mind-set of Kenyans to appreciate the importance of environmental conservation was a herculean undertaking. This is when I recognized the finite difference between a manager and a leader. I had to portray both traits in different endeavours. I had no choice but to cross paths with powerful individuals and make decisions in favour of saving Kenya's natural resources, notwithstanding the consequences. As I took over this assignment, there was no prior training just like that of the university leadership. On-the-job training and the use of common sense were the driving forces behind my success in both careers.

