
My Own Experience

My Entry into Academic Administration – Beginning as Head of the Department of Chemistry (1987 – 1993)

In the line of succession, I was Makerere University's eighth Vice Chancellor and that was in a space of 23 years since Makerere was inaugurated as a national university in October 1970. Prior to my appointment, the average tenure of a Vice Chancellor at Makerere was just about three years. That was how insecure the Vice Chancellor's job was. As Professor Kajubi used to say, the Vice Chancellor at Makerere had become a casual labourer. At that turn-over rate, I thought I was about to become one. But as we shall soon discover, I had made that judgement rather prematurely.

There is an old saying that "chance favours a prepared mind", but I strongly doubt whether mine was ever prepared for this appointment. In spite of all the tribulations, Makerere still had a huge academic flare. It was, and is still an institution constantly in the eyes of the public. Most of its former Vice Chancellors had been intellectual giants in their own right. Was I one of them? This was one of the many questions which kept racing through my head when I was informed that I had been appointed as Professor Kajubi's successor. Fine, I had succeeded him at Kyambogo, but was I succeeding him again at Makerere? Was that not too much? Secondly, the job of a Vice Chancellor at Makerere had become too risky and without security of tenure. Vice Chancellors could be hired and fired any time at the whims of the appointing authority. Who wanted such a risky, thankless and insecure job? Was I prepared to take on a job with such known risks, for which I could be publicly humiliated and summarily dismissed? As far as I was concerned, I had long worked out a road map for my academic career and being Vice Chancellor was not one of the milestones in my career path. Even if I were to nurture such an ambition, the probability of ever being considered for the job was simply too low for me to waste my time thinking about it.

Whatever criteria the Chancellors were using to choose the Vice Chancellors, I did not seem to have the slightest clue or the required credentials. As I have said before, I was one of those Ugandans who had decided to keep Uganda's politics at arms length. My preoccupation was my academic work, which I was actually enjoying, and the survival of my young family. I had set myself specific milestones as I progressed towards the top of my academic career.

This account is not intended to be an autobiography. It is a compilation of some of the events that had an influence on my life during my long years at Makerere, which will give the reader an insight into how the son of a retired UEB Senior Charge man, born and raised along the shores of Lake Victoria, made it to the pinnacle of Makerere University, Uganda's premier university.

For me, the road to the top had been a road of incredible surprises. With the exception of those coming after the repeal of the Makerere University Act of 1970, I also strongly suspect that the same is true of the men who served as Makerere's Vice Chancellors before me. If, in the days of the pre-2001 Act, there were members of staff at Makerere who had cherished the ambition of being appointed Vice Chancellor, they must have been terribly disappointed, because back then the Chancellors never advertised the job. The appointment of a Vice Chancellor was entirely the prerogative of the Chancellor on the advice of his Minister of Education. In some instances, there were no prior consultations with the appointee. One would just suddenly hear the news over the radio that one had been appointed.

The Vice Chancellor had no written contract or letter of appointment. Only the instrument signed by the Chancellor served as the contract document. The duration one served as Vice Chancellor was also not specified. That is to say, at least in theory, that the Vice Chancellor's term of office was open-ended. In effect, this meant that he could keep the job for ever. However, as we have already seen, the practice was different. I guess that, by not giving Vice Chancellors written contracts, the Chancellors were cleverly avoiding being dragged to Courts of Law for breach of contract or for wrongful dismissal when they had reason to fire a Vice Chancellor without notice. So, they could hire and fire as they wished without fear of litigation.

I trace the genesis of my ascendancy to top echelons of Makerere back to the 1980s when Dr Olwa Odyek took over as Head of the Chemistry Department. Dr Odyek had a habit of entrusting me with the leadership of the department whenever he was away, in spite of the fact that there were other more senior colleagues around. I used to resist his requests, but he would insist that I stand in for him, though he never told me why he thought I was the most suitable person to act in his stead, and I too never bothered to ask.

Even then, I was not interested in the job of Head of Department because I knew that administration would tie me down and leave me with very little time for myself. I needed all my time for my academic pursuits and to moonlight for

my family. As I have said before, I used to like the eight o'clock lectures, specifically for that purpose. But one day in July 1987, all that changed. As usual, I went to give my eight o'clock lecture. I believe I was teaching second-year students from the small lecture theatre on the ground floor of the department's main building. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary, just another day, until I ended the lecture a few minutes before nine o'clock. As I was walking out of the lecture theatre, covered in white chalk, an elderly messenger in the Vice Chancellor's office by the name Saloongo Lutalo was waiting at the entrance with a letter marked "urgent". He told me he had been standing there for over half an hour. He had decided to wait until I finished teaching because he did not want to interrupt my lecture. His instructions were that he had to hand the letter to me in person. He also wanted me to sign for it in his delivery book.

Saloongo Lutalo was a person I had known for some time when he was a messenger at our Dean's office. He had just been transferred to the Vice Chancellor's Office, together with Ms Dorcas Muherya, who was the Dean's personal secretary. When he handed me the letter, I went straight to my office, which was on the first floor to read it there.

However, on my way up, I could not help wondering why the Vice Chancellor had written this urgent letter to me. Nevertheless, I resisted the temptation to open it before I got to my office, lest it contained bad news. Little did I know that I was in for a big surprise!

In the office, I quickly opened the letter and began to read. I could hardly believe what I was reading. The Vice Chancellor was brief and to the point. He had appointed me as acting Head of Department with immediate effect until further notice. I had to arrange for an immediate handover with the previous Head, Dr Olwa Odyek. I was not given a choice to accept or to refuse the appointment. There and then, my life had been transformed. I became destiny's child, so to speak. Besides a thumping heart, several questions came to mind. What had my friend Olwa done? After all, at the time he was fired, term limits for Heads of Departments had not yet been introduced; so the problem was not an expired term. What was it? Why did the Vice Chancellor not consult me before to find out whether I was interested in the job or not? Besides, the department had members of staff more senior than me, so why pick on me? How was I going to ask a friend who had put so much trust in me over the years, to vacate the office without notice and tell him to hand over all departmental keys to me? Was that not tantamount to betrayal and a stab in the back of an old friend? Could any sane person believe that I had not secretly conspired to have him removed as Head of Department? These and other questions were begging for answers, which only the Vice Chancellor knew.

Before I could break the bad news to Dr Odyek, I decided to seek audience with the Vice Chancellor for more details. I had been thrown into a state of unexpected confusion and I badly needed some quick answers. As I have said

before, Professor Kirya had one good attribute; he was always accessible if and when he was around. As soon as I entered his office, he congratulated me and apologised for not having consulted me before he made the decision to appoint me as acting Head of Department. He intimated me with the reasons which had prompted the University Administration to take an immediate corrective action. Why me? I asked. Did he think I had the Midas touch?

Professor Kirya had a quick answer. University Management thought I had the potential to provide leadership to the department. In a polite way, I protested saying that I was not aware of any leadership qualities in me, and that I had never been a leader before. He simply laughed off what to him appeared to be a lame protest and assured me that he and his colleagues would give me all the assistance I needed, and that there was nothing to worry about. How was I going to break this sad news to Dr Odyek? Again, the Vice Chancellor's answer came quickly. He had already informed him. With those reassurances, I thanked him for "putting so much trust in a rookie" and walked back to the department to start the unenviable task of preparing to take over from Dr Odyek.

I expected bitterness and resentment, but Olwa Odyek turned out to be a magnanimous colleague. He took the news calmly, which made the handing over a very smooth affair. I was simply fretting over nothing. As a friend reminded me, all the people in leadership positions, regardless of how they got there, were as human in flesh and blood as I was.

This was also a reminder that, contrary to the common belief in Buganda, no human being was born with a double umbilical cord, not even kings. It was time to stop fussing and get on with the job. As people usually, "the rest is history". When the Department of Pharmacy opened at the Medical School in the late 1980s, Dr Odyek asked the Appointments Board for a transfer to the new department. The Board granted him his request. I was sad to see him go. Colleagues were congratulating me and wishing me well in my new job, which helped me to settle quickly and with confidence. Two years later, the new system of electing Heads of Departments was introduced. I had to decide whether I should continue or step down for another person. Before I could make up my mind, some colleagues approached me, saying they had liked what I had done in the last two years and asked me to continue as Head of Department. As far as they were concerned, there was no need to change leadership.

When the time came to elect a Head of Department in 1989, I was returned unopposed. However, when my letter of appointment came, the University Secretary, Reverend David Sentongo, had back-dated my contract to July 1987. The implication was that I had only one year to serve on the new term. It also meant that the election had to be repeated in 1990. Although it was an odd contract, which seemed to just legitimise the period I had served as acting Head, I was not overly bothered, I just went about doing my job with the same vigour

and enthusiasm as before. Interestingly, as Dr Olwa Odyek used to entrust me with the leadership of the department whenever he was out of office, so did Professor Mugambi who was then Dean of Science. For some reason, Professor Mugambi had also found it convenient to leave me acting as Dean whenever he was away, instead of calling on his more senior colleagues.

Quite frankly, I did not know what to make of all this confidence my senior colleagues were putting in me. Occasionally, I used to feel embarrassed when Professor Mugambi asked me to act as Dean instead of Professor so and so or other Heads of Departments. It is plausible that Professor Mugambi used to pick me because of my passion for hard work, my obsession with order, or for what some used to describe as my genial and easy-going nature. I could never tell. However, with hindsight, I had reason to believe that these were pointers to what lay ahead for me. In fact, I recall a small conversation I had with Ignatius Bitariho, one of the long-serving laboratory assistants in my department. He jokingly told me that I was likely to go far, and that my success in life would be beyond my wildest expectations. That was years before I became Head of Department. I simply told him to knock it off. What had he seen special in me? I remember telling him to stop playing fortune-teller, and that was the end of that conversation.

In the late 1990s, the department was supposed to hold an election for a new Head and my colleagues had once again decided to elect me unopposed. However, before we were through with the election, destiny changed the course of my life once again. I had been doing part-time teaching at Kampala High School for several years to make ends meet and most of the students I taught thought I was a good teacher, though I had never trained as a teacher. In fact, all those years I taught at Kampala High School, I was technically a licensed teacher. I had continued to teach at the same school and to coach a few "A" Level students even when I became busier as a result of my new administrative responsibilities. Poverty was still real.

At the time, being a Head of Department at Makerere was just a high sounding title with additional responsibilities, without any meaningful compensation for the extra work. You had to earn your living the hard way or your family would starve, and mine was not a small family. Beyond the informal high school teaching and teaching content to the BSc Education students registered in the Faculty of Science, which was all I knew about the teaching profession, I had never been a student in the School of Education; but that did not stop unexpected things related to Education happening to me.

One day in 1990, the former Minister of Education, Amanywa Mushega decided to pay an impromptu visit to the university. While I was busy at my desk, I received a message from the University Secretary that the Minister of Education was on the way coming and was likely to visit my department, so I should get ready for him. Although the notice was very short, fortunately we were

well prepared. During my time as Head, we had developed a system of keeping our department clean and tidy all the time and most members of staff were always around doing their work. True to his word, Amanywa Mushega came and I had the pleasure of taking him on a guided tour of the department. He found several members of staff busy in their research laboratories. He was particularly fascinated with Dr Olwa Odyek's work on natural products. He found him performing a Soxhlet solvent extraction on some plant leaves. I was told that, in his subsequent discussions with the University Administration, the Minister kept making reference to the fascinating experiment of Olwa Odyek – “the man he found cooking herbs in the Chemistry Department”.

The Minister visited several other departments in the University before meeting the Vice Chancellor and members of the University Administration. Later, I learnt that the Minister had expressed disappointment with most of the departments he had visited, except one. He was disappointed because the Heads of some of the departments were absent and no one seemed to know where they were, or because he had found some departments in shambles. The exception, according to what Reverend Sentongo told me later, was our department. While congratulating me on saving the day, Reverend Sentongo said that the Minister had told them that among the departments time had allowed him to visit, it was only the Department of Chemistry at the Faculty of Science he had found functioning properly. I took Reverend Sentongo's compliment as flattery and the whole episode was soon forgotten. Then in September of the same year, the Minister happened to be looking for a new Principal for ITEK, an affiliate of Makerere University, to replace Professor Kajubi who had returned to Makerere as Vice Chancellor. Also, the acting Principal had been rejected and chased away by the staff after the death of one prominent member of staff under suspicious circumstances. The Minister's choice fell on my unsuspecting self. This was in spite of my lack of any formal qualification in the field of Education; and it was the first time I was breaking ties with Makerere in about 20 years.