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Engagements with Academic Leadership at the Grassroots

Under normal circumstances, the university procedure dictates that the VC appoints the chair of a department, whereas the dean was elected. For one to be appointed to chair a department, one needed to have been a senior lecturer with a record of academic publications and teaching experience.

The time of my appointment as chair of department, I had won two competitive research grants that brought some substantial amount of training grants to the University and department from IDRC and the NACOSTI. So my consideration to serve as chair was deserved. However, instead of the three years renewable once as chair, I served for two years, and then was appointed Deputy Principal in charge of academic affairs at JKUAT. This was a first, to be appointed deputy principal without serving as dean or completing my term as chair.

Given the culture of appointments to serve in senior university administrative positions during those days, one would say that my appointments were accelerated and politically favoured. But looking back, I think that the appointments were deserved and reflected the time and quality of my input in administration at the lower levels. For example, during my two years tenure as head of department, I was able to source and secure various Master's and PhD scholarships for staff development. I also served as secretary and later chairperson of the Weed Science Society for Eastern Africa. This helped in promoting the development of the discipline and young scientists in the department.

The society's biannual proceedings became a fertile training ground for junior academics in the department, Kenya and the region. I also strengthened the teaching of statistics and biometrics in the department. During my tenure as chair, the VC engaged me on several occasions to chair mediation and promotion committees for junior staff.

At no time did I ever harbour ambitions of serving in higher university administrative posts. My appointment as chair was in itself surprising. And

despite the fact that I was qualified to be appointed, I do not know which other consideration the VC then had in mind in offering me the appointment as my focus was on teaching and research.

In the previous chapter, I have demonstrated how deeply I was engaged in research, student supervision and publications. I also thought of gradual progression through deanship, as the practice was then. So my eventual appointment as DP after serving only two years as head of department was more surprising and I wondered what the appointing authorities had taken into consideration.

The various committees I sat on or chaired gave me prominence. The decisions we made in such meetings were appreciated and carried the day at that time. There could be variations on the decisions I made by the higher authorities but none was nullified. I worked well with my heads of department, the deans, Deputy Vice-Chancellors and the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Nairobi. I occasionally acted for the departmental chairperson whenever he was away. Drs D.N. Ngugi and D.M. Mukunya were respectively my chairpersons when I was in Kabete. Deans Prof Karue, S. Keya and D.N. Ngugi worked with me.

In 1985, the University of Nairobi created six campuses: College of Agriculture and Veterinary Sciences (CAVS), College of Architecture and Engineering (CAE), College of Biological and Physical Sciences (CBPS), College of Education and External Studies (CEES), College of Health Sciences (CHS) and College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHSS), each headed by a Principal.

The University appointed five Principals to head them. My first Principal in the CAVS was Prof. Geoffrey Ole Maloy, followed by Prof. Dominic Oduor-Okello and later on by Prof. Shellamiah Keya. I had an excellent working relationship with each one of them as I assisted in many students' advisory services. I had respect from my colleagues and the staff played a key role in quelling riots whenever they surfaced.

I played another demanding role in the final year students' field and industrial attachments. I chaired the committee which scouted for suitable students' placement. My predecessor, Mr Don Thomas, was very helpful in identifying large-scale farms. I worked well with him also.

The meetings which I chaired or where I was a member taught me several lessons. I learnt how to handle diverse situations. There were issues which needed immediate solutions and I had to have answers for them instantaneously, sometimes regardless of the quality of an answer. I learnt how to handle both staff and students on various matters. I was on a students' advisory committee, a mentoring group and a junior staff appraisal committee. Ms Esther Thiongo served as my secretary on the committees, especially for farm practice arrangements.

My first contestable position was to be a leader of a co-operative society called 'CHUNA'. The idea was hatched at Kabete Campus by a few staff members. We decided to form a society to enable us save a portion of our salaries and borrow

money from the savings and repay it at a very low interest rate. A few of us steered the process and CHUNA was created.

I later campaigned for a slot on the supervisory committee to oversee the right operations in the finances. I won the elections. We were three on the committee: Profs Karega Mutahi, Henry Oruka Odero and I. My leadership traits in public affairs were pronounced during the meetings.

We were strict and demanded monthly statements showing staff income through contributions, loans given out to them and recurrent expenditure. This was my first financial management duty. Members were happy with our work but the main management committee was not too happy with our restrictions. In fact they took it that we were indeed supervising them. We followed the Societies Act and always reminded them that we were the watchdogs of members' contributions.

I was a member for three years and did not contest for the second time because of other more demanding roles. During our tenure no money was misappropriated. The three of us did not want to tarnish our names by being compromised in any way. We left the society sound financially. Later on, we learnt that our successors were sacked and surcharged due to loss of money. CHUNA is now one of the biggest and well-managed cooperative outfits in Kenya. In fact, it assisted me acquire land on which I built my residential house in Nairobi. Many University staff members have benefited a lot by getting loans which are paid back at the lowest interest rate in the market as compared to the commercial banks.

Departmental Chair

The role of Vice-Chancellors in most African universities is very clearly stipulated in the universities' acts and statutes. Among them is the appointment of staff to various university positions. The University of Nairobi statutes state that the vice-chancellor chooses the department chairman to head the department from amongst its (senior) staff. Under normal circumstances, he consults other senior members of the department as to the suitability of the candidate before making the appointment.

Normally, in many universities in Kenya, chairpersons of departments are appointed for a period of three years, renewable once. Chairpersons constitute University senators who make decisions for the University. They run the departments and are the academic and administrative heads of that important teaching cadre.

Among their roles is ensuring that quality teaching takes place in the departments, timetables are prepared on time, examination processes are adhered to and examination board meetings are held before the results are presented to the faculty or school boards. These are very vital organs of the university administrative hierarchy. They are, indeed, the small vice-chancellors of the university, representing the big office.

The most important consideration before one is appointed is that one must be a respected lecturer, who can perform the academic and administrative roles with integrity, is respected by colleagues and can work mutually with others for the growth and development of the department, and by extension, the University. It is important to note that the appointee deals with teaching staff, technicians, support staff of all levels, students and the public at large. The same person offers lectures and carries out research for the purpose of promotions within the university cadre. One must be a team player.

At the time I served as head of department, Nairobi then was the only public university. The tensions that are commonplace these days between management and grassroots academics were rarely noticeable, and as head of department, it was easy to navigate ones' administrative duties without compromising laid-down procedures. I was not micro-managed from the office of the VC, and ran the department fairly independently. Occasionally, I had problems with members of the teaching staff in the department regarding how they carried out their teaching duties, but we managed to resolve such issues within the department amicably, without involving the university administration.

Two issues, however, which confront heads of department nowadays is expanding Universities and the management of external examining processes. This is serious where there are so many part-time lecturers. These are necessary components of university academic processes and can pose challenges. However, external examiners in some cases would delay moderation of examinations and submission of reports to the detriment of students' progress. External examining is an important aspect of quality control in the universities and cannot be dispensed. The delay, therefore, slows down academic processes in the department and is one issue that I had to deal with as head of department from time to time.

Part-time lecturers would not, in most cases, submit examination and CATs on time. At times they would disappear with students' scripts; and as head of department, I had to go around tracing them. This was time-consuming and caused anxiety among students. Reflecting backwards what I had to go through as head of department, and these days when universities are increasingly relying on part-timers, I would make a strong recommendation that part-time lecturing be done away with. In some cases we have whole university departments largely run by part-time lecturers. Even if they were to be used, I would recommend that this be in very small rations and under the supervision of a senior permanent member of the academic staff. The problem is lack of funds to pay them promptly.

I always delivered my lectures in the mornings. I preferred free afternoons for preparations, students' appointments and research planning. I taught undergraduate and Master's classes in weed science and environmental courses. I also taught the Introduction to Crop Production to first years. I enjoyed teaching the young students who had just been admitted to the university and who expected a difference in the mode of teaching from that of high schools.

I made my stand and requirements clear from the first day of lectures that all students must be on time and meet my obligations in fulfilling the subject requirements. During the early and mid-1980s, there was an adequate supply of teaching materials and laboratory provisions. I had an excellent technician, the late Mr Francis Kinyanjui, a former East African Community Plant Taxonomist, who was very conscious of his work. Practicals were prepared on time and clear instructions for the students were always ready before it started.

One morning, I got a call that the Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Phillip Mbithi, wanted to see me. It was soon after my morning lecture. I wondered why he asked for me knowing that we always made appointments through the chair and deans' committee. I drove to the Main Campus which is about twelve kilometres away from Upper Kabete Campus where my department was located. I arrived there and requested his secretary to allow me see him. She was kind enough and made a call to him.

Prof. Mbithi walked out to the reception area and ushered me in with his usual broad smile. Prof Mbithi was a very interesting Vice-Chancellor. He knew many people and related well with them. As an agricultural extensionist-cum-sociologist, the professor knew the right method of persuading staff to support him. He called me by my first name as we sat down. He enquired about the faculty and department and whether the students were behaving well. Students' riots were so common in the 1980s and 1990s that lecturers were always alert. Any small misunderstanding between students and mainly the government would spark demonstrations which would always cause closure. He merely wanted to know whether all was calm at my campus. The VC had one of the finest networks of detecting trouble.

As we continued chatting over a cup of tea, he called his secretary, Catherine, and requested for a letter which was supposed to be delivered to me. It was my appointment letter as the chair. He gave me his signed letter, explained why he had called to personally deliver it to me. He wanted to know my reaction. He wore heavy rimmed spectacles and could occasionally peer piercingly through the thick lenses.

I had no prior indication whatsoever about this appointment. Apparently he had consulted the outgoing chairman then, Prof. David Ngugi and other staff regarding a suitable person to take over from him. This was the time when I was so busy collecting my field data for the IDRC project. I saw myself having two divided roles.

I honestly knew the work of the chair was demanding. Under some circumstances, one would refuse the appointment, but this had never happened due to the wide consultations carried out before such appointments were made. It could also be disrespectful to the head of the institution and may not augur well for the appointee. One thing I liked Prof. Mbithi for was his humility to call

and tell me in person about the change. Other Vice-Chancellors might have sent a letter without giving prior indication.

In any case, I accepted the challenge and promised that I would do my best to run the department. My department had the highest number of teaching, technical staff and research projects. It is still the largest in the Faculty of Agriculture.

I left the VC's office and drove off to Kabete, called my wife, Esther, who was teaching in Rungiri Secondary School and told her of the appointment. She commended me and told me that it was part of my duties as prescribed in the terms of service. I did not ask what comes with the appointment but the professor had told me that there were some allowances I was entitled to. My sincere concern was not even the benefits, but about time and efficiency of running a department. My research work and lecturing were my prime concerns.

I had trials scattered all over Kenya, and saw the danger in conducting them. Field trials call for the researcher to diligently set them up, collect data, analyse and make conclusions appropriately. It is important to stress here the need for quality research and dedication. It is a very personal undertaking and conclusions made from it reflect the scientist's grasp of the knowledge matter. My technicians would assist but they were few. I relied a lot on graduate students.

Handling all these were my immediate challenges. I decided to soldier on. The many meetings could also interfere, as we were expected to be present. I, however, used to send my other staff to represent me, especially at Senate meetings.

I told my staff members in the department that I had been appointed to head Crop Science. In the 1980-1990s, the 1 o'clock news in Kenya would announce appointments. It could be from the Head of state, or any other high-ranking quarters. I heard my name announced as the new head of Crop Science. The University of Nairobi was the only public institution of higher learning in Kenya. Others were colleges. The then President Daniel Arap Moi was the Chancellor and Prof. Phillip Mbithi was his Vice-Chancellor, answerable directly to him. It was therefore prudent that he was continuously briefed on the university's matters at every stage.

The 1 o'clock news aired my appointment and I took over the mantle from Dr David N. Ngugi. The staff was excited and I had to carry on. While I had been at Prof Mbithi's office, I had asked him what my specific role would be as the head of department. He gave a short answer to the effect that one learns from other chairs because there was no formal training. He further urged me to excel in whatever I did and should always engage in wide consultations. That was it, as far as I can remember. Similar future appointments did not have terms of reference, not even a briefing! One was simply directed to assume a responsibility and learn on the job; period!

At a personal level, and having done my university studies in the United States where university governing bodies exercise a greater degree of autonomy, I found

the practice where a Head of state as Chancellor has to know and announce who even becomes a head of department, a little too intrusive of the political establishment into the governance of the university even at lower levels. However, since that was the culture then, I carried on with my duties as head of department. I however found departmental head-ship challenging in that most of the time was taken up by mundane administrative duties and little time was left for any academic work and progression. The current three-year duration, renewable once, is therefore adequate as one needs to exit and concentrate on academic mobility.

In May 1988, I took over from Ngugi who was vying for deanship at the Faculty of Agriculture. He handed over the department to me and told me to follow up the most urgent matters like examinations and research protocols which were pending.

My Agenda

As a new chair, I had some ideas on what I could excel in. I wrote a manifesto for my guidance. There was no written strategy or plan for the department but I formulated one. I set myself some targets and called the teaching staff to advise on the same. I set up the following tasks having participated in the previous meetings and noted shortcomings:

- To immediately stop having any part-time lecturers, instead appoint permanent ones to take over teaching Biometrics and Statistics;
- Increase teaching staff in Crop Protection and initiate its full autonomy as a department; hence secede from the Department of Crop Science.
- Increase the number of research proposals in the department to attract funding; Assign more staff to mentor first-year students.

These were the urgent concerns as the status quo continued. I kept my dean posted and kept an open door policy with my staff. I actually met the four objectives within the short period I was chair. Biometrics and Statistics which was always taught by part-timers was now fully staffed as we had advertised posts and had recruited full-time staff.

Research proposals were increased in number after we held proposal writing seminars. The department of Crop Science became autonomous and I was given a vote to run it. It lasted for a few years and was later amalgamated back to Crop Science and Crop Protection for no apparent good reasons. The staff we had hired were absorbed in the original department of Crop Science.

As a chairperson, I used to attend and participate in the Faculty Board meetings, College Board meetings and Senate. We also used to hold seminars and workshops on the management of the departments. I recall the first Principal of my college, Prof. Geoffrey Ole Mayoi, telling us at one sitting that new chairmen had the duty to perform well since most of us were young entrants.

I was 37 years old then and my desire was to publish as many papers as possible. University promotions are permanently based on publications in addition to other duties. In fact the latter never count. The common saying in university corridors is “publish or perish”. I therefore had to run the department, continue my research programmes, supervise postgraduate students, teach my normal allocated hours and, most importantly, ensure that my young family was catered for.

My wife was teaching and our first two sons were attending nursery and later primary school. I could drop them at various stations in the mornings and pick them later in the afternoons. I had to plan carefully. I was able to run my errands and perform my academic roles with ease. I learnt to delegate and follow through unless I was personally required to participate in meetings. This is a habit I acquired throughout my academic and administrative careers. But I was selective as what to delegate and what not to assign anyone.

My staff was supportive. We developed an excellent working relationship amongst ourselves and our department was a leading example in attracting research grants. I pushed for promotions where appropriate and advised staff to adhere to the respective promotion requirements for each cadre. I could not push any request until I was satisfied that the criteria had been met. Quality was my guiding principle in the discharge of my duties.

Director, Kenya Marine and Fisheries Board

Appointment as a director of Kenya Marine Board was the beginning of my national responsibilities. As we were busy strengthening the department, I got a call from the minister’s secretary, Ministry of Environment and National Resources asking me to go and see the minister. I drove there to see him.

Mr Andrew John Omanga, the minister, welcomed me into his office and commended me for the good work I was doing at the university. I thanked him even as I wondered why he had called me. He did not waste time in long stories, but gave me a letter appointing me as a Board Member of the Kenya Marine and Fisheries Institute (KEMFRI) which had its headquarters in Mombasa. All he said was that our coastal area was being degraded fast and marine life was threatened; so I was expected to go and protect the environment. He added that our natural resources like fish, mangroves; coral reefs needed laws to regulate their utilization. The same was equally important in our clean water environment such as lakes and rivers.

The appointment was for four years and renewable. Hon. Omanga was a graduate from Makerere University. He was a respected Minister for Environment and Natural Resources during President Moi’s regime. He had a passion for education and scholars. He was my Member of Parliament and knew my credentials. The Hon. Minister appointed me to the Board because of my

expertise in Environment and he respected meritocracy. The board was composed of deserving men of strong calibre.

I was happy to take on my new appointment, having been involved in environmental protection meetings, discussing the same issues. Interestingly, my chair of the board was none other than my mentor, Professor Reuben Olembo. Other board members included: Professors David Wasawo, John Kokwaro, George Kinoti, and Ken Mavuti. There were also representatives of some ministries on the board. The professors were all from the University of Nairobi, Faculty of Agriculture and Science.

The four preferred to be addressed by their first names: Reuben, David, John and George. Ken and I were budding scientists and we marvelled at the manner in which they casually but seriously conducted board meetings! These senior colleagues in several aspects were my mentors in academics and administration. Mentorship continues even unto old age. We could not dare call them by their first names; we did not measure up to their ranks. This was a powerful team, including ministry representatives. It is during these meetings that I really learnt the etiquette of conducting board meetings and collegiate interactions.

This was a ministerial appointment and I took it with a clear mandate on the protection of our coastal resources. The team was powerful and was composed of my mentors and seasoned researchers. Luckily, we used to meet four to six times a year. The appointment was a testimony that I could contribute my expertise in some areas which needed action. The appointment was gazetted and I wrote to the minister to thank him. As a young scientist, I learnt a lot from my senior board members who were also University of Nairobi professors from various departments. I had practical exposure on the importance of management and conserving our coastal natural resources and upland water bodies. I interacted a lot with the institute staff. This was an eye-opener for future leadership engagements.

My First Book: Weeds of East Africa (Magugu ya Afrika Mashariki), 1987

My first book was co-authored with a colleague from weed science, Mr John Terry, in 1987. The publication of the book was sponsored by Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). Mr Les Matthews, who was responsible for the project at the FAO Headquarters in Rome, Italy, was very impressed with my work and included me in the panel of Weed Experts from the developing countries.

We were a team of about twelve individuals covering all the geographical regions of the world. Our role was to advise the FAO Director on critical areas of Weed Research and what action must be taken. Les visited me in Kabete two times and supported some research projects. It is through these visits that I mooted publishing a weed book to cover the taxonomy of East African weeds. My request was granted and he provided the funds. Mr John Terry and I made

a number of field visits in order to collect weed specimens for the publication. It was a nice experience which reminded me of my post-graduate work at Rutgers University and later in IITA on weed research and identification.

We translated the book into Kiswahili and it became a good reference for weed identification for the students in the East African region. We took very elaborate pictures and used the then latest technique of mounting them for ease of identification. I was able to fund one Master's student, one Saha, under the project. I still possess a few copies.

Reflections: As virtues, humility and integrity have a lot in common. My appointment as a chair of a department by my vice-chancellor had a lot to do with my conduct and interaction with academic and administrative staff. He must have seen some management potential in me. I worked for the department with dedication and did not let down my boss, the Vice-Chancellor. Staff, both in KEMFRI and the department were co-operative. Academic and research programmes improved and I demonstrated my ability as a team player. I made a mark in the department. I later considered this early appointment as a sharpening tool for future responsibilities.

My appointment to the Board of KEMFRI by the Minister demonstrated his confidence in me. As a young scholar I was excited to join the board which was highly dominated by a learned group of professors. I considered the appointment an honour to me. It enriched my managerial skills and, at the same time, exposed me to Kenya's coastal natural resources management. I worked well with my colleagues and did not let down the appointing authority. Instead, I added my expertise to the board and brought in an environmental concern to bear. I would later use their expertise to manage NEMA as the Director-General.

This was also the beginning of my leadership management. What I noticed in both appointments, chair of a department and board member, was that there were no briefs, no training courses, no induction materials and no clear terms of reference. One uses common sense and is expected to perform to his or her best in all circumstances. Learning on the job and high-level use of common sense were imperative. This is the truth in many public appointments in Kenya.