
A Surprise Appointment to the Office of Deputy College Principal

My busy schedule was the order of the day but I did not feel constrained in meeting my deadlines. As a chairperson, I had to plan the day's work well, attend meetings, deliver my lectures and follow up on my research progress. I also ensured that I supervised my PhD and Master's students during their research projects. In fact I was so used to my daily routine that I had extra time to attend to my personal needs.

A more surprising and unexpected appointment was my secondment to a University College as a Deputy Principal in charge of Academic Affairs of the Jomo Kenyatta University College of Agriculture and Technology (JKUCAT) which was a constituent college of Kenyatta University (KU). I would later be appointed as Chairman of Kenyatta University.

At about 1.30 pm on 15 November 1989, a colleague of mine came in and told me that he had heard my name being mentioned during the one o'clock news. I had just completed my morning lectures, had had lunch and was getting ready to go and inspect my field trials on minimum tillage. As we were talking, a call came in from another colleague to confirm my appointment. I considered this appointment unique since I had barely served a term as chair of department. Under normal administrative progression, one had to go through both academic and administrative ranks before being appointed to the position of deputy principal. In my case, I had the academic credentials but little administrative experience.

When I confirmed the appointment, I called my loving wife, Esther, and told her that I had been appointed to JKUCAT as a Deputy Principal. She had also confirmed the same through a friend. Both of us tried to understand the implications.

I honestly did not know that I would leave the University of Nairobi for any other posting. I had come there basically to work and stay. I always thought that

appointments were for the mighty and well-connected individuals. I confirmed the new assignment after calling my Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Philip Mbithi. I knew protocol. I called my dean and College Principal to enquire whether, indeed, I had been requested to leave Kabete. They said that presidential appointments were never questioned. I had to oblige and move.

Later that day, I drove to the office of my boss, the Vice-Chancellor, who had also earlier appointed me as the departmental chair. When he saw me in his office, he of course knew why I had driven all the way to see him. He laughed heartily and handed me an appointment letter.

This time he did not take time to explain to me what the letter was all about. He simply said that His Excellency, the Head of State, had appointed me to JKUCAT as a Deputy Principal to Prof. George Eshiwani. He further informed me that new colleges were coming up and they needed to train young scholars to eventually take over university management. I was therefore supposed to report to my new station as soon as possible.

That was the end of my brief discussion with Prof. P. Mbithi. He remarked that I should go and work hard to lift the status of the college and to learn on the job. I did not have time to enquire about my terms of departure from the University of Nairobi and what I was expected to do in Juja Town, fifty kilometres away where JKUCAT is located. I left his office confused.

I drove to Consolata Primary School where my kids were learning and took them home as was the routine. My wife had already arrived home and we started discussing my appointment. We both internalized the matter but did not know where to start from. This was in November 1989, just a month before Christmas break.

My Immediate Concerns

After a day of considering my next move, I made a list of the most demanding issues that had to be sorted out. The first problem was how to drop my wife and children to their respective destinations and back. We used to live in Kikuyu Township close to my place of work. My wife taught at Rungiri Secondary School about two kilometres from our house and the children attended Consolata Primary School on Waiyaki Way about 5 kilometres from my office. It was therefore convenient for me to drop them early in the morning and pick all of them in the afternoons as I left my office. I needed an immediate solution to this matter. I always wanted to drive my family personally to their schools and did not see the need for a driver.

The second immediate headache was how to handle my third-year students of Crop Protection who were just about to do their final examinations in a month's time. I needed to cover the syllabus, give and mark the examinations. It is

instructive that in Kenya, state appointments are taken up at once, lest someone else takes over your seat or you are replaced. I did not therefore have enough time to cover my syllabus.

The third agonizing consideration was to plan on my research protocol. I had conducted my elaborate research programme for over three years, set up field trials and acquired a number of equipment including two vehicles. I was the official contracted researcher while the university was the custodian of finances and general overseer. That is how the protocol was observed. Otherwise, my research assistants would not be able carry on with the technical matters of the research undertakings. Other lecturers had their programmes to run.

The new chair was not a weed scientist, and had little interest in my area as he also had his research undertakings. Research proposals are very personal, and unless one has a group of continuing graduate assistants, the work suffers. I knew I would not complete the work as planned. Luckily, I had published some papers as part of work done. My students continued collecting data and writing their theses.

I approached the donor, International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and we reached an amicable solution of discontinuing the trials but retained the project double-cabin pick up for the department.

A new 504 Peugeot Station Wagon, which I had procured for the project, generated debate as to whether to retain it in Kabete Campus or take it to Juja. I preferred it retained in the department since I acquired it while there. That would have been the fairest decision. But the disagreement between the two institutions made IDRC take back the vehicle. My research work fizzled out. Some funds were taken back while overheads expenses were retained. This appointment disrupted my research at an early age of 38 and I had to plan my next new assignment.

After three days of planning, I decided to drive to the new campus and see the Principal. I had been to JKUCAT previously and so it was not a new place. The total distance from my house to Juja was 56 kilometres. I could not possibly commute that distance. I returned home and told my wife that the place was too far to commute daily from Kikuyu. We had to find an alternative. The easiest was to move closer to town and reduce the distance at the same time maintain our children in the same primary school.

This was done and we settled in Kariba Estate, South B, in February 1990. One concern was solved. As for my third-year students, I promised that I would complete teaching as I reported to my new place. I completed the syllabus, gave a final examination, marked the scripts and provided marks.

My first official reporting day to JKUCAT was on a Monday in December 1989. I drove to the campus only to meet the Principal, Prof. George Eshiwani, driving out. We actually met at the gate. He recognized me, stopped and requested if we could meet later in the week. That was a good decision which gave me

extra days to teach and mark the papers. I, however, drove in and spoke to the Academic Registrar, Mr Joel Mberia, whom I knew and he gave me some good tips about the new upcoming university.

The Office of Deputy Principal

I settled in JKUCAT in December 1989. It was originally a technical training college. It trained students at certificate and diploma levels. The college stands on land donated by the Founding President of Kenya, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta. The college was producing middle-level technicians who manned our agricultural and engineering industry. It was supported by Japanese government through the Japanese International Co-operation Agency (JICA). The founding president signed a memorandum of understanding between the governments of Japan and Kenya for technical assistance.

My role as the deputy principal in charge of academic affairs was specific: to be in charge of students' affairs, come up with new academic programmes, handle any academic staff matters relevant to the college's academic progression. A gazette notice was issued by the government to elevate the Technical College to become a Constituent College of Kenyatta University and all academic programmes had to go through Kenyatta University Senate for vetting. I studied the notice in conjunction with the Kenyatta University Act and Statutes. It was clear what my role would be in our college and as far as academic programmes were concerned.

We were three Deputy Principals: one for administration, one Dr Josephat Yego; the other one for research, Prof. Rosalind Mutua; and I for academic affairs. We all reported to the principal, Prof. George Eshiwani, who was seconded here from Kenyatta University. The team was complete and we all had various tasks of nurturing the young college into a university. We actually had an uphill task. Starting a new institution has its advantages and disadvantages. The three divisions: Academic, Administration and Research needed to be set up and be functional just like other universities in Kenya. I was aware of the academic programmes and what the staff and community expected of a new college.

As Deputy Principal of academic affairs, I used surveys, workshops and conferences to develop the programmes. Stakeholders were involved in all the processes during the development of new curricula. Having participated in the University of Nairobi Senate meetings, the kind of resources I needed to develop academic programmes were clear to me. The basic procedures for initiating new programmes were demand. I involved stakeholders from the agriculture and manufacturing industries. This helped the graduates in job placement and created a positive image of the new university.

The college inherited staff who were employed under the Ministry of Education and Teachers' Service Commission. Both teaching and support staff

jobs were threatened. I had to deal with credentials of academic staff, while my other colleagues had to handle those of the administrative and support group. It was prudent for me to concentrate on academic requirements because the demand for higher education is ever growing.

The University College was meant to grow into a full-fledged fifth University of Kenya and admit students to pursue degree courses. The long journey ahead of us depicted the setting up and nurturing of a college through some torturous route. I was in charge of all students' affairs, examinations and academic programmes. Many times, Prof. Eshiwani would leave me acting whenever he travelled out of the country or when on leave. He had confidence in me and I took the work seriously. I, however, encountered some problems which had to be solved without delay. My fellow deputy principals and deans were always ready to give some advice. This was good training for the future tasks.

The Principal

After four years of planning, the University College became the fifth public university through an Act of Parliament in 1994. It took five years to put everything in place before it was given the autonomy. Academic programmes were well-thought-out and the Senate had approved marketable undergraduate courses.

The fifth Kenyan public university was set up to be a science and technology-based institution of higher learning. My predecessor, Prof. George Eshiwani, was appointed Vice-Chancellor of Kenyatta University and I took over from him as the Principal who oversaw the transition from college to fully-fledged institution.

There were hurdles along the way as we planned our programmes. The vetting of staff was a problem as we needed to retain qualified ones and release others to their respective employers. Conversion of colleges to universities is a major headache when it comes to staff engagement.

Having been appointed a Deputy Principal and consequently a Principal, I was fully responsible for the upward growth and development of Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology.

