

VICE-CHANCELLOR PROF. STEPHEN GITAHI KIAMA: MY VISION FOR UoN



Varsity Focus held a one-on-one discussion with the Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Stephen Gitahi Kiama, on the future of the University beyond 50 years. As Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Kiama is the driving force behind the activities that will take the University to the next level of growth. Cognisant of the fact that the University's next scorecard will reflect the decisions made during his leadership, Prof. Kiama made time to explain his vision for the University and some of the proposed actions for realising this vision. We bring you excerpts of our interview with the Vice-Chancellor.

What do you consider as the greatest achievement of the University of Nairobi during the 50 years that it has been in existence?

Answer:

The greatest achievement is the transformation of our country. The University of Nairobi has transformed this country in all sectors, both public and private, in a way that would not have been possible if it did not exist. The University has provided health support for the Kenyan people, and the East African region as well, by producing doctors and other essential health personnel. In the dairy industry, Kenya is a milk exporter, unlike other countries in the region, because of the contribution of veterinary doctors from this University. This University has produced the CEOs running various successful establishments in the country; the experts in constitution-making; and those heading our judicial institutions. Graduates from this University are also driving the vibrant debates taking place in the National Assembly and the Senate today. We have produced leaders in the building industry responsible for the beautiful structures found in the City of Nairobi and across the country, including the master planning.

Generally speaking, this University was a very strategic establishment by the government. Look at the other countries which did not have a university early enough and you will know the difference. But we still have a lot of work to do.

What has been the University's major setback?

The major setback, in my view, is that we have not taken good care of our scholars. As a result, some of them left the country to go and serve elsewhere, some were detained, and those who remained developed fear. The recovery process from this setback has been slow.

The government's shift in financing priorities also destabilised the University and demoralised the scholars. We need to recover from this setback and that is why people reforms constitute a vital component in my reform agenda.

The issue of scholars is core to the University. How do you intend to attract and retain the right calibre of scholars for the University?

We will begin a transformation process which will provide a governance and administrative structure that returns the decision-making processes to the scholars, the faculties, and the departments. We shall focus our resources where the scholars are so that we free them from routine administrative tasks and allow them to use their time to think and expand space for the University.

A section of the scholars seems to be uncomfortable with the reforms being proposed by your administration. How do you intend to bring them on board?



We are going to engage with the scholars continuously because this is important. The debate on reforms is not new, but maybe we accelerated the process more than was expected. Some people fear that implementing the proposed reforms will remove the opportunities for individual growth, but I want to clarify that universities are about scholarship and not administration. The University is about thinking, developing new knowledge, creating new opportunities, and imparting new skills to transform communities. This is why we are measured based on such things as research output and the students who graduate. We still have the positions for professional growth from assistant lecturer to the level of professor. If there is a problem on these issues, then we will fix it together.

What would you consider as the priority of the University at this point in time?

The priority of the University is people reforms; where people are able to identify their skills and their strengths and we support and nurture



them to improve productivity. This is because when individual productivity is improved, then productivity of the entire University improves as well. We must ensure that everyone plays their role to enhance the value of the other to achieve a better sense of belonging to the University.

The issue of finance is another priority of the University because we need to take care of our needs as an institution. We have to manage our expenditure better, align resources with our core mandate, and enhance our resource base to make more. If we do this, we shall secure the University now and into the future.

How will people reforms contribute to the University's core mandate and good standing on the national and global stage?

The University of Nairobi is about people. First, there is the issue of image. If people are saying and doing the correct things, then we shall win the trust of our clients and the University will grow. Secondly, we will also improve our competitiveness. People reforms will also enhance our productivity through publications and the graduates we produce leading to increased visibility. Collaborators will come calling and we shall be in a position to choose our friends.

Recently, your administration introduced a number of reform proposals which should lead the University to prosperity. What fuels your belief that the proposals carry the right prescription for the University?

I have been a student here and I have observed the University from the perspective of a student. There were things I would have liked to see as a student. I have also been a teacher and grown through the ranks to become a full professor; as a member of staff there were things I would have liked to see the University doing. I have been in administration as a member of a committee, chairman of a department, associate dean, acting dean, director, principal, and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Human Resource Management). I am now the Vice-Chancellor. As an administrator in this University, I have seen what needs to be done. I have also been a researcher and I know what researchers go through. Besides that, I have a PhD from a university outside this country, so I have that perspective of a university having spent four years working with different scholars. I have worked in many other universities. When I was young, I worked in St. Andrews University in Scotland and I know the level of equipment there. I worked at the University of Berlin in Germany and the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa among others. I

have visited many other universities and I have collaborators. From that interaction I have the perspective of what a university is and how it is run.

I have an image constructed from all those perspectives. I have this image of a world-class university where there is a high concentration of talents and resources, and there is also linkage with the private sector. I would like everyone to join me in walking into that university together. Obviously, the perspective of every person will be different because we have different experiences, but I think the University of Nairobi has nurtured me well enough to occupy the position that I occupy today.

How do you plan to include other people's perspectives in this image of a first-class university that you have envisioned?

Everyone has a role to play in realising that new image; whether it is a student, a parent, staff member, or a collaborator. It is through everybody playing at their stage that this University will be elevated and hence the focus on people reforms. We have to ensure that everybody is equipped appropriately to play their roles in the positions that they occupy so that we can succeed.

What value do you expect the of alumni of this University to bring in the context of people reforms?

We have produced many graduates whom we consider as children of this University. In the context of people reforms, it is important for them to come back and ensure that the needs of their University, their mother, are also met. Our alumni are responsible people who will also serve as role models for our students. We need our alumni to join us in building one another so that we can make this University really transformative to offer better services to current and future students.

How will you go about preparing the University community to join you in realising this image you have of a successful University?

I will go out and continuously engage the faculty and other staff to listen to their views on what we can do better because that is important. We shall also identify the skills that we need to nurture in order to obtain the desired results.



In future, what is the one achievement that you would you like to associate yourself with because you served this University as Vice-Chancellor?

That the University of Nairobi positioned itself for greater impact to the society. I want this University to be seen in terms of innovation and community transformation beyond offering access to higher education. We need to also cut the niche of doing research that is truly transformative and has real impact to the communities that interact with us. I want this University to be the destination of choice in Africa for researchers and students from all over the world because of the nature of our programmes and how we deliver them.

There are fears that the plan to increase fees for the Module II programme is likely to discourage prospective students from coming to the University? What is your take on this issue?

The University of Nairobi has an obligation to admit government-sponsored students and will continue to do so. The University Senate also considered it necessary to develop a programme where we also admit self-sponsored students. However, we do not expect the self-sponsored students to pay less fees than the value of the education we are offering here and hence the adjustments we are proposing. For students under the Module I programme,

the University has not increased their fees; we are simply implementing the differentiated unit cost financing model (DUC) which the government approved about three years ago. Whatever the case, we have not increased fees for our continuing students under any programme. In future, however, a student who qualifies to join our Module II programme and is admitted to this University will be expected to pay the approved fees at the time.

What is your message for the University of Nairobi community and stakeholders at this point in time?

The University of Nairobi is a public entity fully aware of its obligations as well as the expectations. The University is also operating in an environment that keeps on shifting. We must be that University that responds to change positively; walking together as we do so. We must enhance our skills to adapt to change. It is also important to live true to our values of innovativeness and commitment among others. In the face of reforms, which are inevitable, we shall continuously enhance the skills of our staff because we need each one of us to reach where we want to go as a University. Everyone should feel free to contribute in whichever way they can to make the University of Nairobi better for all of us.

Thank you very much.

