

We spend N96m on power per annum – FUNAAB VC

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Vice-Chancellor, Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Prof. Olusola Oyewole

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The Vice-Chancellor, Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Prof. Olusola Oyewole, in this interview with SEGUN OLUGBILE, narrates how he has been combining his job as a VC with his being a general overseer of a pentecostal church

You are a few months into your tenure as the vice-chancellor of this institution. How hot is the seat?

Well, I consider it a great privilege and opportunity to serve this great university after serving Africa at the quality assurance unit of the Association of African Universities in Accra, Ghana. I quite agree that a job like that of a vice-chancellor comes with lots of pressure; but I have learnt and mastered how to handle such. I make sure that I operate within the ambit of the social environment I find myself and what I mean is that in an environment like this, there are rules and laws that regulate one's conduct.

I have been myself, holding to the values of excellence, integrity, openness and team work that I cherish. I know that if you don't have values, people will give you theirs, and you will be living under their shadows.

What have you contributed to the growth of the institution since you resumed as the VC?

When I came in, I told the university community that my vision is to advance FUNNAAB with a view to making it one of the best universities in the world. I know that leadership is very important to achieve this and when I say 'leadership', it's not by word but by action. So, if the greatness of a university is to be measured by the Webometric ranking done for universities in the world, then, I will say we are on the path to achieving our vision. This is because going by the latest ranking, we are the second best university in Nigeria, after the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife and though not stated, we are the best agriculture university in Africa. This, I think, is a pointer to our commitment to becoming one of the best universities in the world.

But how is your university coping with dearth of PhD holders, especially when the report of a NEEDS Assessment conducted in public universities revealed a shortfall in faculty members in these institutions?

It's a challenge that most universities are contending with but I'm glad to tell you that about 90 per cent of our faculty members here are PhD holders. What we did about five years ago was to call 31 of our lecturers who were qualified to go for the doctorate degree to register. We supported them and 29 of them are PhD holders today. Only four couldn't make it. I believe that if all our institutions are doing this, the challenge of dearth of lecturers will soon be eliminated.

But how do you retain them when there are so many universities in search of PhD holders?

This is not a problem. We have created the right environment by rewarding excellence and commitment. We also encourage excellence in what we do and the Tertiary Education Fund has been very supportive of our human and research development. On our part, we have a very strong postgraduate school where quality postgraduate students are groomed under a foolproof quality assurance unit. Besides, we also have a strong staff support scheme for our researchers and lecturers. Under the scheme, they can go out of the country for six months to conduct research. First and second degree holders are also given six years to obtain the PhD. Our staff welfare scheme and the working environment are good and this makes it easy for us to retain them. We also have a Graduate Research Fellow/graduate assistant scheme for our first class graduates who are eventually incorporated into our faculty members

But some critics have described the quality of some PhD holders from the nation's universities as poor because of lack of facilities to carry out research and some supervisors' decision to approve substandard work based on sympathy...

(Cuts in) No, no, I don't agree with that. A supervisor will not compromise standard for whatever reason because he knows that he is producing for the world and not for himself. When you are producing a PhD, you know that your student's work is about research and research has a global implication for academic and world development. So, if you do a substandard work, it's not just your student that would be disgraced; you also would share in the blame. Yes, Nigeria has some challenges but there is no nation in the world without challenges. These challenges are however not the same. But I can tell you that Nigerian academics are very good, they can compete with their counterparts from anywhere in the world. That is why if you go to any serious university in the world, you will meet Nigerians there performing excellently well. As I said earlier, I've worked with the African Union and I can tell you that Nigerians are respected

anywhere they work in the world. In fact, the quality assurance policy we developed for the AAU has been adopted for all universities on the continent by the African Union Commission on Higher Education.

Dearth of municipal facilities is another challenge facing universities in the country, how best do you think this can be eliminated?

That is a big challenge and at the root of it is underfunding. It is peculiar to public universities where tuition is almost non-existent. In FUNAAB, where we have 15,549 students, we can only accommodate about 30 per cent of them in hostels. Those who are lucky to have bed spaces pay N31,000 per bed space. That is for new students. Those in 200 Level and above pay N19,000 per bed space per session and there is no special fund to keep them in the hostels.

Of course, power generation is another area where we expend our lean resources. For instance, we spend over N5m on diesel every month and pay the Power Holding company of Nigeria N3m per month. If you add these together, we end up spending about N96m on power per annum. That's huge! You can imagine what this amount would do to equip laboratories, workshop and library in a year. If we must come out of the problem of municipal facilities on campus, more funds should be injected into our universities, while accommodation fee should be increased if we cannot charge tuition. However, administrators of tertiary institutions should check wastages by making judicious use of available funds. That is what I met here and that is what we are doing in FUNAAB.

You are a General Overseer of a pentecostal assembly, how have you been coping combining this with your job as a VC?

Let me first correct this impression. God is the General Overseer, not an individual. So, I've never seen myself as a G.O. You should remember that in a church there are several people-pastors and children of God who are empowered by God to carry out different roles. If we allow people to do their work as given to them by God, there won't be any problem.

You should also remember that when I was in Accra, the work (church) was going on and now it is not suffering. As a VC, I'm religion-blind; I deal with people on the basis of who they are and what they can do, not on the basis of their faiths.

Nigerian universities are becoming localised in appointment of people into top academic and administrative positions. Don't you think this is eroding the concept of universality, which is the hallmark of a university?

Localisation of university, in terms of appointment of people into academic and administrative positions, will not augur well for development. Any institution that sacrifices merit and excellence on the altars of mundane sentiments will not grow as quality will suffer. Any forward looking institution should not discriminate in appointments.

Here, our focus is to internationalise our operations by bringing in foreign students and expatriate lecturers. And if anybody merits any position, he or she will not be denied because he or she is not an indigene.

However, I don't see anything wrong when a university gives preference to members of its host community in the employment of lower cadre workers such as drivers, clerks, cleaners and domestic staff.

FUNAAB clocks 25 this year, however are you celebrating this?

Our 25th anniversary is just to appreciate God, appraise our impact and then plan to forge ahead. We will also use it to appreciate our founding fathers, former vice-chancellors such as professors Nurudeen Adedipe, Julius Okojie, Israel Adu, Isola Adamson and Oluwafemi Balogun for their contributions to the development of the university. Two books, *FUNAAB: The Making of Agriculture University* and *FUNAAB: The Genesis of Growth*, will be inaugurated to mark the anniversary. We also challenge each unit, department and faculty to celebrate it in its own unique way. There will be the Library Week, the Students' Union Week, Farm Fair, Research Fair and Open day for parents. The highlight of the anniversary is the Silver Jubilee Special Convocation Lecture and a day dedicated to sports contest between staff and students.