

We are on course to become Africa's top university - Mbithi

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Prof Peter Mbithi was appointed the new vice-chancellor of the University of Nairobi on January 6. He becomes the seventh vice chancellor since the inception of UoN in 1970. He spoke to [The Star Newspaper](#) writer Ramadhan Rajab about his plans and vision for the university and a wide range of issues touching on Kenya's higher education.

Prof Peter Mbithi, UoN, Vice-Chancellor

Early this month, the Spanish research firm Webometrics ranked the University of Nairobi at position seven among the best African universities and the top ranked university in Kenya. How does this make you feel, and what is the strategy going forward?

Being number seven in Africa makes us extremely uncomfortable. Though we have surpassed our 2014 target where we had set the goal of being among top 10 universities in Africa, we now feel we not only deserve to be in the top 10 but we must be at the top.

We emerged ninth on the continent last year and this year we are at position seven. We have since revised the targets and we want to be top five or even better. Our strategy is to position the

university as a premier institution of higher learning and innovation not only in the region but also in Africa and beyond.

South African universities have remained top performers as far as these rankings are concerned, with the latest survey having University of Cape Town, Stellenbosch University and University of Pretoria holding the top three positions in Africa. What are they doing right and as you speak of steering UoN to the top position, what are you going to do to topple SA universities' dominance?

Give them their due. Firstly, they have structures that we do not have. One, they have a culture of publishing their research materials in good journals. Speaking on behalf of UoN, we are working a lot on having a similar culture. They also have advanced IT capacity but we are improving very fast; we are making our ICT and website capacity to be the best as we automate all our services.

On research, we are focusing on a new strategy of revamping our research portfolios. It is our top priority and as university management, we are committed to redirect all our efforts in ensuring that we attract adequate funding for research, motivate staff and ensure that the university conducts cutting edge research in all areas of operations. We have kicked off mentoring programmes for both students and our staff on how to write good papers and be able to publish in world's renowned journals.

The other area where the SA universities are doing better is in terms of digital repository. This is the ability of managing and storing of all scholarly information resources and other content in a digital format where it can be accessed or extracted with ease by the rest of the world.

As a university, we have embarked on this journey of managing and preserving our content on the digital platform. So far we are doing well. In this category, we ranked number 30 in 2013, last year we were number seven and now we are ranked at position six.

To showcase our theses and publications to the rest of the world and build more networks, it is the position of the Senate that improvements must be done in this front and we are working on it. We believe that to compete with the best is a matter of strategy and hard work. We have the best support staff and professors you can think of in the region.

We also continue to admit the best students and these are some of our strong points that we bank on to steer us to the top. We have 115 full professors and more than 300 associate professors backed up with many senior lecturers with PhDs.

As you settle in as vice chancellor, obviously thoughts of leaving a legacy when your term expires must have crossed your mind. Please share with us the dreams you have for the university and the footprints you intend to leave behind?

As a matter of priority, I have set out to grow the research fund and its portfolio. Together with the staff and students, we have our eyes trained on becoming among the top five universities in Africa. We also want to build and grow a robust and sustainable student mentorship programme

that will offer a wholesome and dignified education to all students who will pass through this great university.

Within my 100 days in office, I have embarked on establishing a pedagogy centre to train professors and lecturers how to teach better and mentor students.

I want to improve the teaching and learning infrastructure and this starts with the completion of the university towers that will take us to the next phase. My tenure will also see the completion of Kisumu Campus Complex, then embark on the pharmacy building and next month or so, we will be breaking ground for construction of phase one of the Wangari Maathai Institute campus in upper Kabete.

These are some of the things we are working on but majorly a dignified and strong mentorship programme, research and improved teaching and learning environment will be our key focus. We will work on motivating our staff so that we can attract and retain the best. Though for one to become a professor is a rigorous process, I target to grow the full professor base to 500.

As you work on achieving these goals, what do you foresee as challenges that might derail the journey?

One of the major challenges that affect most public institutions is failure to have a free hand in management.

Another challenge is that of students' unrest, but we will continue to work with the students and be ready to address their issues before they snowball to protests and indiscipline. We foresee the university unions as a challenge but we will engage with them so that by the end of the day work gets done; we will do this by keeping them motivated.

However, the biggest challenge is on us management and other university leaders to rise up and work. We cannot depend on the government to do everything for us; we better grow up and become sustainable by having our own funding base to run our university. We are a mother university and we must be able to show the way for others.

One of the criteria used in the global world rankings of universities is the number of international students a university has and is able to attract. In the case of UoN, there have been concerns that it is unable to attract many international students because of the courses on offer and poor infrastructure especially accommodation. What is your take on this?

We have some international students, but the number is not anywhere where we want us a university. Our target is to have more than 20 per cent of all students admitted to be international students.

We have challenges that hinder us from attracting large numbers of international students but we have a centre for international links, which is set to rebrand, so as to play a critical role in

growing these numbers by having proper criteria to respond to inquiries, applications, admissions and general efficiency.

We are also looking at the general welfare not only for international students but the entire student population. Within our strategy, we have vowed to improve accommodation. We intend to revamp and refurbish the current hostels, build new ones and enter into partnerships with private developers who can put up affordable housing units that can offer accommodation to our students.

As the country celebrates the increased access to university education, there is a growing concern among industry players that many graduates being churned out lack relevant skills to meet the market demands. What is your comment?

We don't want to convert university training into a production line or conveyor belt because that is the mandate of the industry. We want to focus more on clear work ethics and skills that should be inculcated in the graduates when still in training and this explains why as a university we are keen on the mentorship programme. One aspect of this mentorship programme is to ensure that we work with industry to improve our apprenticeship programme and industry attachment.

As we speak today, our curriculum is being developed and reviewed regularly with massive industry players input — this makes us train students to industry expectations and demands. I intend to call industry players and universities to a conference to determine what is it that we can do together to address this stubborn accusation of churning out half-baked graduates. Even though I feel that we and other few universities are doing the best, we can't just sit as the problem continues to grow. We must lead the way on finding solutions to this challenge.

Some experts argue that this problem of half-baked graduates stems from how our primary and secondary school education is geared towards passing examinations and not comprehending concepts. There are those who have called for total overhaul of our education system to cure this problem. What is your observation?

Personally I don't think that is the problem and examinations aren't bad as such.

Good education practices are ones that are able to give quality examinations, evaluation and measurements so as to gauge learners as they progress from one stage to the next.

All that is needed is for educators and policymakers to focus more in giving wholesome education at all levels and this should include time for playing. Schools should be places where, apart from getting papers, one can identify and grow their talents.

Speaking about examinations, there are concerns of delayed release of results at UoN. There are allegations that some students fail to graduate on time because lecturers delay to post their marks. Has this been brought to your attention and how do you plan to go about it?

We already have the procedure within ISO certification programme on good management system that gives timelines on how and when lecturers should set, administer, mark and release examination results. It also sets out obligations for the students.

Our analysis is that we have challenges related to students themselves as well as staff to some extent that impact on timely release of exams results. However, this is not a serious challenge even though we are on a continuous improvement of our systems.

Also of great concern are inadequate facilities and speaking to students, they complain of crowded lecture halls. Some say they sometimes have to stand when attending lessons. What are you going to do about this?

We are aware of this and we are handling it, but we urge students to use various platforms to raise these concerns to us; we have the mail system, the SMS, and even letters.

The challenge for improved teaching and learning facilities is real but we are working on it to keep pace with best in the world.

In the past, UoN was known for rampant student unrests. This trend shifted in the last seven or so years, but as we speak today, there are signals of the university sliding to the dark days where violent protests were the order of the day. This is in light of the planned Sonu elections that so far as seen confrontation between aspirants. How prepared are you to face this?

All students are ours and we will continue to work with them without favour. We will build more stronger student-management relationship and put more avenues to address concerns. However, students must agree that there are rules and regulations they signed to abide by and which we will be firm on implementing to forestall any cases of indiscipline.

You have been in the field of academia for more than 30 years. What is your take on the challenges facing higher education in Kenya?

The major challenge is failure to work together. We must be able to think together because there is no single person with solutions but there are many people with ideas which could translate to possible solutions.

We should find out what are the key issues negatively affecting the sector and deal with them together. As universities we must play a key role in finding solutions to every challenge. At UoN, we want to spearhead partnerships among institutions of higher learning to solve the problems afflicting us.

Institutions of higher learning are critical to a country's development. For Kenya to industrialise and meet its Vision 2030 goals, what roles should universities play?

We have had positive changes that focus on science, technology and innovation in our policy documents. Under the University Act, there has been a creation of a research fund, which to me has set ground for universities to help shape and lead the country's industrialisation programme.

As a university, we are ready to play our role in shaping the industrialisation agenda. We have started our innovation programme and we will be launching the innovation policy soon to enable us incubate and commercialise a number of programmes for our students.

We are also setting up a computing for development centre, which will help our staff and students to not only write publications but also to innovate.

Universities in general should be able to guide their students and staff to do research and help them pick out what can be commercialised. At UoN, we have the enterprises service unit that helps commercialise students' and take them to the industry.

For Kenya to be self-reliant and able to create enough wealth its future lies in research and innovation and institutions of higher learning are the only link that can get the country there.

Speaking about research, many students are discouraged because despite working on great pieces of research with informative recommendations or findings rarely do we see these adopted by industry or implemented. Most of the research ends up on shelves gathering dust. How do we turn this around?

We have changed our policy here at UoN. Currently it is important that before one graduates, you publish your findings. Our intellectual property office guides you on how to harness crucial information or findings from your papers. The intellectual property is then picked and incubated for the students so that by the time it goes to the shelves, whatever good that was in the thesis is taken out so that the student can have value for his intellectual efforts.

MY JOURNEY TO THE APEX OF UoN MANAGEMENT

The journey to this position I hold today has been one marked with great commitment, sacrifice and hard work and always keeping my eye to the ball.

To start with I am a professor of veterinary surgery, and a member of the University of Nairobi Senate since 1994. I was born in Kangundo, Machakos County, on July 4, 1956. I did my primary studies locally. Then went to Queen of Apostles Seminary for my secondary schooling concluding in 1975 with an East African Certificate of Education (EACE). Thereafter I went to Machakos School for form five and six for the East African Advanced Certificate of Education (EAACE), 1977. I later joined the University of Nairobi where I graduated with a Bachelors of Veterinary Medicine in 1983. Still at UoN, I did my Master of Science in clinical studies and graduated in 1985, and proceeded to do a Master of Veterinary Science at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada, graduating in 1987, before coming back to UoN where I earned a doctorate degree in clinical studies in 1995.

On academic and professional experience, I have risen through the ranks since 1983 as a tutorial fellow, to lecturer in 1988, then senior lecturer (1997), to associate professor (2001) before I became a full professor in 2006 in veterinary surgery at the university's Department of Clinical Studies.

When it comes to university leadership and management, I began as a chairman of the department of clinical studies where I served between 1995 and 2003. In 2003 to 2004, I was elected the dean of the faculty of veterinary medicines and later became an acting principal College of Agriculture and Veterinary Sciences between 2003 and 2004. When the government changed the policy allowing the competitive recruitment of vice chancellors, then deputy vice chancellor administration and finance Prof George Magoha applied for the position and was successful. When the position fell vacant, I and other colleagues applied for it. I managed to be successful and was confirmed deputy vice chancellor administration and finance, a position I have served since 2005 to January 6, 2015 when I was appointed the new vice chancellor of the University of Nairobi, taking over from my predecessor Magoha.