

CAPTAINS OF INDUSTRY

Kenya's Golden Hands



Prof Magoha stewards institution out of debt through financial discipline

Professor George Albert Omoro Magoha, the fifth Vice-Chancellor of the University of Nairobi, is charged with the leadership of the country's premier university whose mandate lies in teaching, research, and consultancy and community service.

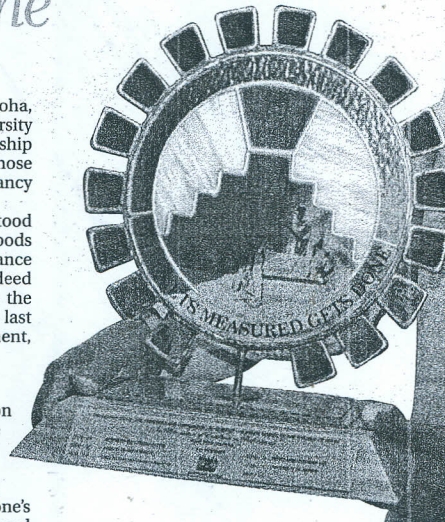
Since its inception in 1956, the University has stood for excellence in the delivery of products, goods and services. This is confirmed by quality assurance bodies and ranking by education peer groups. Indeed the recent webometric ranking placed UoN as the best in East Africa and ninth in Africa while the last performance contract ranking by the government, awarded UoN the only excellent mark.

MANAGEMENT STYLE

Prof. Magoha runs the biggest higher education institution in East and Central Africa. He views himself as captain of a team, and his management style has over the years been partly inherent and partly learned. "Leadership is about serving, more than about one's self." It is about getting managers to work hard and figuring out the mix of strategies that will enable the university to produce highly skilled graduates for the job market. Under the guidance of the immediate former Chancellor, Dr. Joseph Barrage Wanjui and former Chairman of Council, Dr. John Nyangeri Simba, the University took bold steps, ten years ago, to hire all top managers competitively and orient them on transformative leadership.

Prof Magoha was among the first beneficiaries of transformative leadership training when he was nominated by the Chancellor to attend a leadership business executive program at Stanford University. This shift in managing university affairs had a direct impact in transforming it. In the last ten years for instance, student numbers have doubled, rising from a total of 35,000 in 2005 to the current 70,000.

The institution's financial discipline has improved greatly under the stewardship of Prof. Magoha. He ensured that the institution was lifted out of a crippling debt that stood at about Sh2 billion when he was first appointed. At that time, the university's audited accounts were five years behind schedule.



Prof George Albert Omoro Magoha, EBS, MBS Vice-Chancellor, University of Nairobi

Currently annual accounts are presented on time and published for public scrutiny and accountability.

INFRASTRUCTURE

On infrastructure, the university has spent more than KSh 3 billion on construction, improvement and refurbishment. Indeed, the on going construction of the 22-storey building at the University worth Ksh 2.5 billion, initiated by Prof Magoha, is testament to the university's audacious attitude. On completion, the project will address the problem of shortage of academic facilities.

On the research front, the University has witnessed a tenfold growth from Ksh350 million to Ksh 3.5 billion this year, a figure that is expected to rise. The University also has over 8,000 computers and over 100 computer laboratories which has improved computer usage within the University and increased internet connectivity.

As a product of Starehe Boys Centre, Prof. Magoha embraces firm discipline and his efforts to rein in students' behaviour and make the institution operate effectively has yielded dividends. "I believe in positive dialogue with students and making sure that they follow the right procedures in seeking redress." Magoha has earned a reputation for taking tough stands against unruly students and lazy managers. He attributes his style of management and leadership to skills instilled in him by his mentor, Dr Geoffrey Griffins, former head of Starehe Boys Centre. "He

taught me several lessons including the maxim that if you decide to do something, do it as best as you can and within the shortest time. Don't take 'no' for an answer, especially in management."

Magoha admires Professor Njabulo Ndebele, the South African author, literary academic and former Vice-Chancellor, University of Cape Town, who taught him that those who are at the top must be humble.

This humility however must be tempered with extreme firmness.

When he became Vice-Chancellor, one of the greatest challenges that Prof. Magoha faced was politics. He came into university management at a time when running a public university in Kenya was a political affair, a lot of external interference including the appointment of top administrators and the allocation of resources. With time, says Magoha, this has changed and universities benchmark with top corporations in terms of management style and leadership as well as the human resources.

While promoting and creating transformational thinking among his team, Prof. Magoha has employed the maxim of being firm and fair to all. "We give targets. We recognise the efforts of everyone, from the cleaner to the vice-chancellor. Managers, for example, should be in the office by 7.00am." The early morning meetings have been typical of Magoha and have now been embraced across the university.

Unlike the previous appointments which were made by the president, Magoha was hired competitively for the vice-chancellorship. The position was advertised



The Vice Chancellor, Prof George Magoha, convenes the 50th Graduation ceremony at the UoN Graduation Square.

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widely, including in the influential *Economist* and he became the first public officer to be competitively hired by the Kibaki government. Prof Magoha joined the fray for the top job at the top university at a time when the reputation of local universities in the international arena was waning and had to craft a strategy to address this problem.

TYPICAL WORKING DAY

The demands on the Vice-chancellor can be daunting. "I wake up between 4.00 am and 5.00am, after prayer and meditation, I read all the newspapers, go through security briefs, and then I hit the gym, do some exercise before taking a cold shower and then breakfast. I am in the office by 7am," he says. "My typical working day is consumed largely by meetings, paperwork and checking with university managers on what is happening. I am usually at home at around 7.00pm, where I often carry some work".

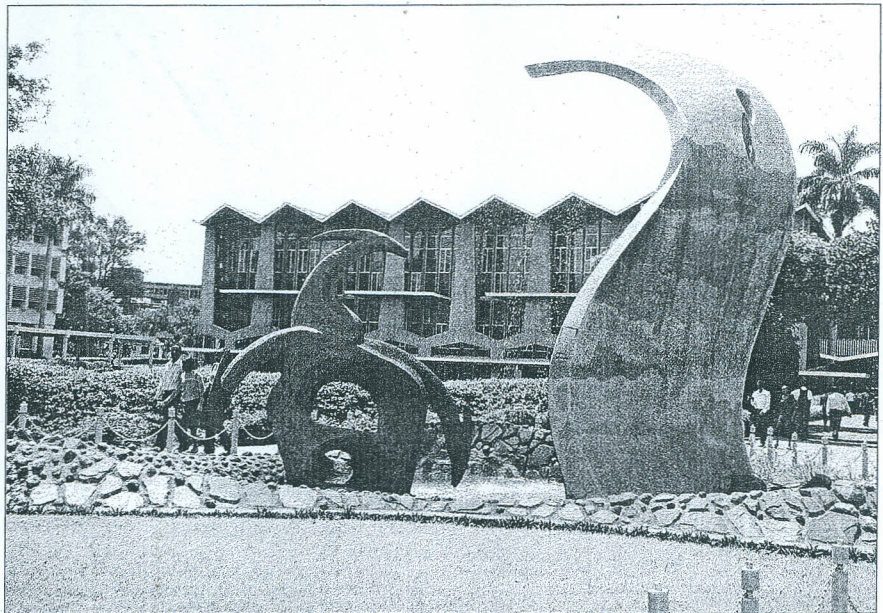
Running a university is not a rosy affair. "I have been called on to make tough decisions, the magnitude of which determine not only the institution's growth path in the years to come but also the legacy that I will leave behind. The biggest challenge I have ever faced was whether or not to close the university during student and staff protests."

The University Council and Senate will always determine the policies and strategic direction of the University but the day to day running of academic and administrative activities remain the responsibility of the Vice-Chancellor."

PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGES

While referring to the recent industrial action by members of staff that disrupted activities in public universities, he had to decide whether to close the University or not following the paralysis that lasted several days. Prof. Magoha is not new to challenges. As a Surgeon, he always makes decisions at critical moments to address health concerns of his patients. It is this experience that has come in handy even when dealing with professional issues as the Chairman of the Kenya Medical Practitioners and Dentists Board for the last five years.

The legacy that Magoha intends to leave at the University is very clear; "a self-sufficient university, weaned from over-



The Fountain of Knowledge at the University of Nairobi was built to honour Dr Yajnik who raised funds for the construction of the University.

reliance on faltering state funding".

Over the years, government support for higher education has declined to an annual increment of about 4 percent despite increased annual enrolment of about 10 percent. Growing student numbers with shrinking budgets while trying to improve quality has been tough.

According to Magoha, "the University has not been harnessing intellectual property. We need to create more patents and boost earnings." Perhaps it is with this in mind, that the University created an intellectual property office in 2006 and in 2011, appointed a deputy vice-chancellor for research production and extension to look at innovations and a main stream them as a source of revenue.

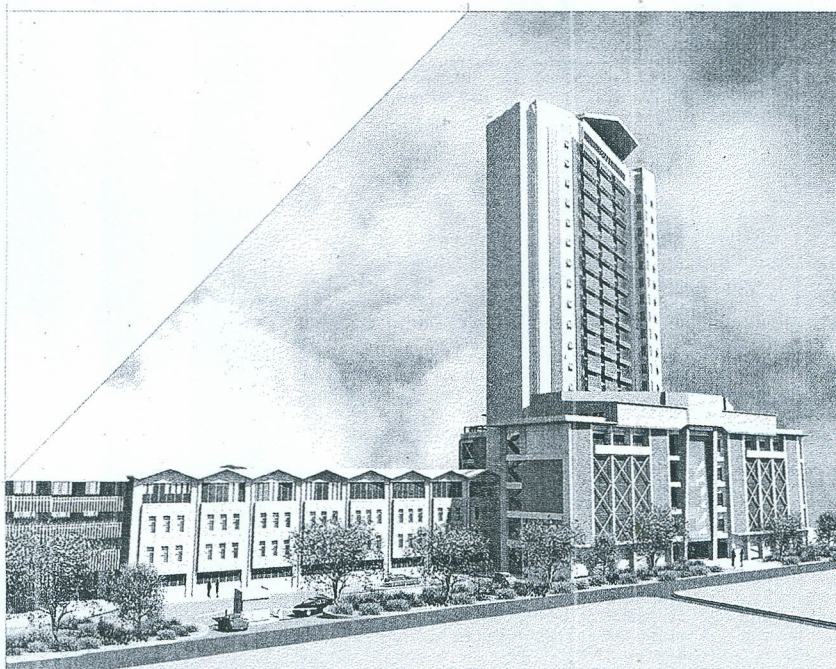
STUDENT UNRESTS

The higher education sector has had a turbulent past, with daunting challenges that included persistent student unrest, underfunding concerns on the quality of the product. Into the future, finances will continue to be a challenge, everyone wants to go to school, but the government cannot cope with the numbers. So university administrators will have to think outside the box. Luckily, the University has oriented its managers to be innovative, creative and protect quality.

Magoha identifies with the leadership competency that one has to be extremely firm, fair and disciplined. "I am like a baker who wants timely and measurable results". I must get what I want. I am available to follow anything up. This may sound like a joke, but sometimes my lack of ability to accept people who are a bit slow is a weakness. I am somewhat impatient, because I believe that time is the only thing you can't save. The golden rule that I follow is to always aim high.

I have been described as someone who doesn't spare others when they make mistakes. I don't know whether this makes me a cruel person, but I can also tell you that when I am punishing, I do so with absolute fairness, and I do reward those who do good work.

Every leader has reached a point in their life when they can pinpoint how lessons learnt have shaped their behaviour. Magoha is emphatic that honesty and openness are important. "it is better that you tell me exactly what the issue is, rather than tell me one thing and then it turns out to be another". As a leader, I work hard, but I also take time to pray and play. One's family is also important and leaders must find time to share with their family. I like to listen to classical music, especially Mozart.



With an aim to achieve an important iconic presence of a tower and a first net-zero carbon landmark of the city, this University of Nairobi tower is designed to set new benchmarks in self-sufficiency among education buildings in the region.