

Okwakol's rich legacy at Busitema

By George Bitu

Even though Prof. Mary Okwakol's tenure as vice-chancellor has ended at Busitema University, she leaves behind a rich legacy.

Okwakol says when she was chosen to kick-start the establishment of Busitema University in Busia district in eastern Uganda, she never anticipated a smooth ride.

"When I first reached the site I could not believe my eyes. Most buildings for the proposed public tertiary institution were dilapidated," she recalls.

Okwakol says times were so hard at the start that it seemed like the new varsity would never take root.

"This university is a much better place. It is among the best universities countrywide," she says.

Rosemary Seninde, the state minister in-charge of primary education, echoes Okwakol's view that as a legislator at the time, she was skeptical about Okwakol's capabilities.

"In 2007, I was a Member of Parliament when the Busitema University issue came up. I am impressed that the institution is at this commendable level. There are no cases of strikes here, which would have signified administrative glitches."

Genesis

Okwakol recounts that in August 2004, the ministry of education and sports set up a committee chaired by Prof. J. Lutalo Bossa to advise the government on setting up a public university in the east.

"The committee recommended a multi-campus university model with the main campus at the then National College of Agricultural Mechanisation, Busitema."

"It was equally suggested that a task force be instituted to plan and kick-start the institution," she recalls.

Gideon Ologe Obbo, the university council chairperson, says Okwakol, Dr Alex Muhwezi and Elisha Obella, were named as the task force management committee members in May 2006.

Obbo describes the start as a trying moment that called for a lot of patience from both the staff and students.

"The task force management committee carried out consultative sessions with education ministry officials in June 2006. This was a vital ingredient in the varsity take-off process of the university," he recalls.

Okwakol notes that even if the task force had been given three years within which to get the varsity on its feet, the task was accomplished within eight months.

"Busitema University was established as a public university under the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act 2001; instruments 2007 No. 22 made on May 25, 2007. This was after it had been enacted by Parliament on May 10, 2007," she says.

Obbo adds that the university opened its doors to the pioneer students on October 3, 2007.

Achievements

Obella, the academic registrar explains that the students' enrolment



The university library is one of the structures constructed during Okwakol's tenure. Photo by George Bitu

has been increasing gradually over the years, with improvement in physical infrastructure.

"The figure has shot up from 151 pioneer students in 2007 to 3,615 as of last year. The university is in advanced stages of introducing open and distance learning for some of its academic programmes to boost access," Obella says.

He adds that since its opening, 26,597 undergraduates have walked through the gates of the institution.

"When we started, there were three members of staff. The institution boasts of 442 qualified professionals now," Obella says.

Okwakol says six campuses of Busitema University have been opened over the years with the most recent being Pallisa, that started in 2015 to handle management sciences.

"Busitema university main campus has the faculty of engineering, Nagongera has science and education and Namasagali is for natural resources and environmental sciences. In Mbale, we have the faculty of health sciences while Arapai caters for agriculture and animal sciences," she says.

Obella notes that of late, information and communications

technology (ICT) has been incorporated into institutional affairs thereby enabling staff and students to embrace the digital age.

Seninde says the good deeds of Okwakol have brought about tremendous progress and trust at the science-leaning university.

"As a ministry, we have confidence in this university. I, therefore, would like to thank Prof. Okwakol for the befitting foundation," Seninde says.

Fronting female enrolment

Okwakol managed to establish a partnership with Forum for African Women Educationalists Uganda (FAWEU), to support economically disadvantaged girls.

"We set up this partnership in 2007. So far, 31 female students studying different programmes have been supported," she says.

She says 20 have graduated, while 11 are undergraduate.

Rosemary Mutabule, the university council vice-chairperson, says the university appreciates the importance of educating the girl-child.

"At the start, few female students were pursuing sciences at A'level. So, the university council approved a gender parity policy on students

admission fronted by Prof. Okwakol's administration," Mutabule says.

She assures that the policy implemented since 2010, has been instrumental in the increase in female students' enrolment from 13% in 2007 to 31.7% this year.

Janet Museveni, the education minister expresses her gratitude with the improved female students' enrolment. "Females used to fear sciences, leaving them for males. I am glad the number of girls has gone up to change this age-old scenario," Mrs. Museveni argued.

She thanked Prof. Okwakol for having done her best to make this as well as several other commendable deeds, achievable during her tenure.

Partnerships

Okwakol explains that the university had undertaken external programmes that included support to an institution in Rwanda.

"The Rwanda Institute of Agriculture and Animal husbandry is indebted to us. Our faculty of engineering trained 25 of their engineers in 2011," she discloses.

She adds that satisfaction with the first batch of graduates led to dispatch of another 45 a year later to

WHAT OTHERS SAY

Winfred Anyango, a student We shall miss Prof. Okwakol for her motherly approach to administration. She never shouted at anyone and even during moments of disagreement, she always took the option of dialogue.



Rt. Rev. Samuel Bogere Egese, Bishop of Bukedi Diocese

Prof. Okwakol has done a great service to society. We shall definitely miss her dedication to duty as she goes home after earning a well-deserved retirement.



Paul Oguttu, former Busia district chairperson

I came to know about Prof. Okwakol during my time as LC5 chairperson. She is one of a kind; highly-learned but puts all her academic achievements aside to relate very well with the common man.



be trained in production engineering.

Okwakol says the external programme has also led to partnerships with India and the US.

Challenges

Prof. Okwakol cites understaffing as one of the challenges faced during her time as vice-chancellor.

"The administration was forced to take on part-time lecturers. This definitely takes a toll on the limited resource envelop," she says.

She says whereas the university undertook the initiative to improve staff qualifications, the limited funding does not allow promotions.

"This led to loss of four members of staff last year. After returning with PhDs we could not promote them, so, they opted to look for greener pastures," she discloses.

Plans

Okwakol says she left the process of establishing a seventh university campus in Kaliro district in the pipeline.

"The Kaliro campus is proposed to handle vocational education. This will be an opportunity to churn out even more graduates relevant to the current job market that majority favours job-creators," she assures.

Who is Prof. Okwakol?

- 1963: Qualified to exit Primary School from St Michael Girls PS, Namunyumya in Bugweri district
- 1967: Obtained O'level certificate (Uganda Certificate of Education) from Mount St Mary's College Namagunga.
- 1969: Got A'level certificate (Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education) from Mount St Mary's College, Namagunga
- 1973: Graduated with a bachelor of science in zoology from Makerere University
- 1973 - 2002: Taught at Makerere University
- 1976: Graduated from Makerere University with a Master of Science (MSc) in Zoology.
- 1993: Attained a doctorate of philosophy from Makerere University
- 2002 - 2006: Served as deputy vice-chancellor of Gulu University
- 2006: Selected to lead a management committee tasked with kick-starting Busitema University in eastern Uganda
- 2014: Appointed to serve as the chairperson of the Uganda National Examinations Board.
- For the last 45 years, she has been married to Nathan Okwakol. Together, they have three children; an accountant, medical doctor and lawyer as well as five grandchildren

Okwakol says times were so hard at the start, but she is happy leaving the institution a better place

