

# Varsity Public Relations Wanting

## Restructuring long overdue

By MARY MASINDE

**Public Relations is not taken seriously by the University of Nairobi. It is not recognised as a management process. This is exemplified by the fact that at the moment officers from two different departments are responsible for performing PR duties.**

The Planning, Public Relations and Information department is headed by Mr. F. M. Waweru. Its functions include the production of the *University Calender*, the annual report and the organisation of the graduation ceremony. The other officer, Kimaita Kirimania, is based in the V.C.'s office. His duties include the day to day liaison of the V.C.'s activities, writing speeches and issuing press releases for the University. Before its establishment the Vice Chancellor used to delegate PR matters to the Planning, PR and Information office.

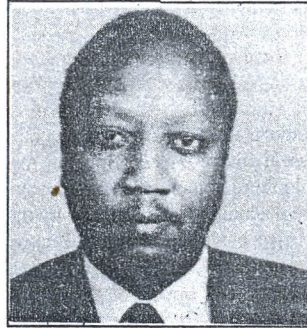
This office was set up at the inception of the University with a registrar as its head. However, the arrival of Professor Joseph Mungai in 1979 saw the incorporation of a Public Relations and Personal Assistant unit to his office. He moved over the late Z.B.N. Oganda, a Deputy Registrar, who acted as his personal assistant and spoke on his behalf.

The early 80s through to the 90s saw a succession of administrators occupying this seat. Charles Wainaina, the current PR manager of East Africa Industries, took over from Oganda. Next in line was J. J. Githaka, a Senior Assistant Registrar, who later moved with Professor Mbithi to the Office of the President. Professor Mungai gave this post a name but no effort was made to introduce a PR structure.

When Professor Francis Gichaga took over he appointed Alfred Mtawali, a Senior Administrative Assistant from the university garage, as his PRO and personal assistant.

Lack of a PR structure means that the impact of PR operations depends largely on the occupant this office and that of the VC. Additionally, being administrators does not necessarily give them PR qualities. Otherwise how does one explain the pathetic situation in which PR finds itself in?

'The *Varsity Focus* is a magazine started more or less as a personal memo from the V.C. office to the university staff. Yet it remains the same more than a decade later. It carries appointments, promotions of lecturers and professors, and the VC's activities and speeches at various functions, including the graduation ceremony.



Mr. Kimaita Kirimania

It does not make a deliberate attempt at being a PR tool for the university and hardly pretends to cater for the interests of the university community. Contributions from other University staff are so minimal that on a number of occasions an issue has comprised of only a page or two. Its production is also erratic and what should be quarterly appears once in a while. The only issue that is regular is the end of year one which literally duplicates speeches carried in the graduation program.

The *University Calender* was last published to cater for the 1989/90 academic year. Since then there has been no official university handout outlining the courses offered by the University of Nairobi as a whole, including the 8-4-4 system. Enquiries

on this and entry requirements can be frustrating as one has to move from one faculty to another in search of information.

Coupled with this is the lack of sign posts. Location of offices is ad hoc and it can be nightmare trudging from building to building in search of a relevant office. For example, how does one locate the ACCE/SOJ Documentation centre and the IDS library, or even the V.C.'s office for that matter? The entrance to the administration building also acts as the tailoring office and one would hesitate to seek directions from there.

As a remedial measure a new reception desk was recently introduced at the entrance of the Gandhi Wing. It is manned by staff, who are apparently new to their job and one wonders if they are in command of locations and directions. It operates during working hours and a visitor needing help during lunch hour and after 5pm would be of a loss as to where to get it from.

Kimaita Kirimania has now entered the scene. Prior to taking up the new post he was the editor of The University Press. A holder of Bachelor of Arts degree and a Postgraduate Diploma in Mass Communication from the University of Nairobi, he plans to rejuvenate the PR office. He blames the dismal

performance of '*The university Focus*' on individual ineffectiveness and on the many administrative duties in the VC's office which bog down the PRO, leaving him with no time to gather information for regular issues. There is no comprehensive PR unit and support staff.

He hopes to boost the magazine with stories contributed on a voluntary basis by the university community as a whole. It will be a communication channel between the university administration and the staff and students; between policy makers and mainstream media and between the university and financiers like the government, NGOs and trusts.

A good image for the university can be realised if its objectives are recognised. Kirimania asserts that the university *per-se* aims at academic excellence - good education, training and research. Riots and damage control are not really its problems. Rarely do students go the streets because of academic grievances. He hopes to promote the institution's pursuit and achievement of its academic goals and to improve on the university's corporate image by use of media.

More easily said than done! For unless the university considers PR as a vital management organ, very little will be achieved.