

A journey of Dr. Idle Omar

Dr. Idle Omar Farah, the Chairman of Council, University of Nairobi, is a man of many hats and experiences

Currently the Director-General of the National Museums of Kenya, he has also served as a member of the Commission for Higher Education, and the Chairman of the Board of the Centre of Heritage Development in Africa.

Idle Farah is a primatologist with a PhD from Uppsala University, Sweden and a prolific author. Indeed, Idle Omar Farah is not the typical African playing at corporate politics but rather, is the quintessential scholar and manager.

Speaking to Varsity Focus, Idle Omar Farah



Farah, Council Chairman

shares his triumphs, challenges and concerns.

Idle Omar Farah was born in Wajir town in the mid 60's. His father, a career civil servant and pioneer educationist, was an early influence in his life. Born in a Muslim family, on a day of sacrifice, he was named Idle (day of pilgrimage), the name should be read in Arabic and not English, he quips.

Idle Omar Farah started his primary school in Garissa, where his father had been transferred. He passed the CPE exam and was the only candidate from NEP admitted to Alliance High School, where for six years he endured the cold weather as well as enjoyed the experiences of a multicultural, multi-religious setting. Idle Farah was in the hockey team, but as he laughingly states, "I did not qualify to be in the athletics team, and the school choir." Idle Farah enjoyed being exposed to virtually every Kenyan community.

After his A levels, during the vacation, Idle Omar Farah, worked as a clerk and also taught at Garissa and County high schools. "I pursued the Mathematics/Chemistry/Biology (MCB) combination in high school and therefore I wanted to help students in high school to build on the sciences." It was also during the long vacation that Idle Omar Farah attended the NYS pre-university course which he found not too bad

in terms of discipline and character building. "This program could have been letter structured so that pre university students get a chance to serve their community but that is water under the bridge now." He quips.

When Idle Omar Farah was admitted to the University of Nairobi for undergraduate studies, it was a toss up between pharmacy and chemistry. "The fact that I was admitted to BVM is not a fluke, because of the terrain that I come from and the socio-economic livelihood of livestock it made sense to study vet medicine. Even as he

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pursued undergraduate studies, Idle Omar Farah was conscience that he would have to pursue advanced studies. "You see, I knew that at some point, because some of my brothers had started their master's degree, I would have to go beyond the first degree". In 1989, just before he commenced his fourth year of study, the government released a policy that vet graduates would no longer have direct employment in government. The future for vet doctors was cast, they were to either undertake postgraduate studies or pursue other careers.

During 4th term, in the last two years of study, Idle sought internship at the Institute for Primate Research (IPR) where he was charged with looking after the monkeys, washing and feeding them and observing their general health. This attachment stood him in good stead so that after graduation, and a short stint as a volunteer or intern, he was recruited by IPR as a veterinarian and he commenced what has been a life-long research on vaccines and thus a journey as a scientist.

In 1994, Idle Omar Farah commenced master's level work at Kabete, where he attained credits and distinction in his course work, but he did not complete the project year because he was offered a scholarship to pursue PhD studies at Uppsala University, Sweden. At Sweden, the

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Dr. Idle Farah awards a student during the recent prize giving ceremony. Looking on is Dr. Manu Chandaria, one of the donors.

research work that he had carried out at IPR, enabled him to enter a vaccine development program on schistosomiasis; in essence, his main course was elevated to PhD studies. At Sweden, Idle Omar Farah also engaged in more research, writing papers and monographs, and working on projects, so that by the time he actually graduated in 1999, he was a prolific research scientist in primate science.

In 2000, while working as Director of IPR, he received a call from the ministry of home affairs informing him that he was being considered for the post of Director General of the Museums. The ministry was also in the process of constituting a board of directors for the museum. The offer

Dr. Idle Omar Farah

was not surprising given that the predecessors-of the position had also been directors of IPR and therefore, Idle was willing and ready to take up the offer. Idle Omar Farah was therefore appointed Director -General of the National Museums of Kenya in May, 2003. Later in 2004 he was called to serve at CHE (now CUE), the University of Nairobi, and the Kenya National Committee for UNESCO.

One of the challenges that Idle Omar Farah has faced is how to revitalise the Museum and evolve sustainable acceptance by policy makers and community that museums can help Kenya. Most policy makers do not realize that museums are not just sites for conserving and preserving things for posterity but rather, are centres for research at all levels including biodiversity, anthropology and development. Because of the legacy entered by the Leakey's, funding of the museum had always been external and thus it was a task to let the government appreciate

that the National Museums of Kenya is a national institution that requires direct budgeting and funding. In the last ten years therefore, the National Museum has been refurbished, restructured with external funders (Europe Union), services have extended to regions in Mombasa, Kisumu, and Lake Turkana, for research.

According to Idle, expanding interest by local people and attracting people is a huge challenge because one has to compete with shopping malls. So what Idle's administration did was to put up shops, restaurants, and photography sites that have transformed the museum into a gathering place. Financing and increased operation to optimum and sustainable use is a goal that continues to challenge. Museums must be made sustainable in the sense that one generates revenue while balancing between commercialization and not making our national

heritage very cheap to appreciate- Kenyans have a right to their heritage without being charged to see it

Idle Omar Farah's experience at the Museum has prepared the business side of his mind. In a real sense, Idle Omar is the consummate entrepreneur, "a business sense is critical, you cannot just smile at research and not contribute to the economy of your country" It is this reasoning that Idle Omar Farah is bringing into academia and in governance of the University. As an alumnus, he has associated with the University in terms of student life, research and academia; his publications are in joint collaboration with staff and he has a good liking for the University "I believe in the separation of powers". This means that the university can take off when the good governance. The Council can provide the right linkage that the government and CUE require, but the University management, should, on a quarterly basis, deliver on operational matters and legal matters. Good governance is requisite for assisting UON to move into implementing the constitution and deliver on services to be felt at country level.

There are good prospects for the University to take the lead role in allowing access, in an adaptable way, to University education, with flexibility, and yet ensuring that standards of academic curricular are adhered to. Ideally, quality education should be delivered in a flexible way such that access

to education should not be a compromise on quality.

As Chairman of Council, Idle Omar Farah is quite satisfied with some of the strengths of the University which include its good standing and its basic infrastructure and established academic programs. The main challenge that UON faces include maintaining the infrastructure through continuous funding and finding capital input to keep it up to scratch. With the advancement of rapid expansion of universities and the need to raise the necessary number of students and staff, there is the temptation to massify programmes and to do away with those which offer little return and the resultant threat of a university losing its niche is inevitable.

The challenges notwithstanding, Idle Omar Farah is firm in his assertion that remaining competitive in research and retention of staff must be addressed. It is not all to do with raising salaries, but rather, motivating staff by perhaps access to financing, hospital, consultancy and good housing. In terms of students, the University must, as a national institution, reflect the national diversity of the country, representing all ethnicities at all levels. This will also call for addressing issues of equity in Module I vis a vis Module II programmes.

Idle Omar Farah would like to see the University take advantage of the open higher education policy, to think critically and innovatively

on how to reprogram cutting edge delivery and research, which must be applicable, relevant for uptake at community level "We now have a platform-ICT infrastructure- and thus must take advantage of this to automate operations, backed by full proof technology."

One reflection, Idle Omar Farah, who comes from a background based in the North, feels it is a privilege and honor to have been asked to serve as the Chairman of Council, at a university that is well known, ranked highly, prestigious and which he admits it is his intention to leave a legacy that will have shown a difference however slight. The idea is to consolidate all the gains the university has made and make a difference in the institution.

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