

The current enrolment at the institution is 1,450

His teaching career begun in 2005, starting off as a lecturer at Kabarak University before moving to Kenya Methodist University to head the Department of Information Technology - he is now Riara University's VC

BY ELVIS ONDIEKI

The dots that form the story of Prof Robert Gateru, the vice chancellor of Riara University, are spread far and wide. They need a master biographer to join them to make a flowing story.

A boy from a poor family in Likipia County, digging farms with his family to make money, and as a result posting not-so-impressive marks in his final examinations in primary school. Joining the harambee side of Leshau Secondary School, his father selling some of his livestock to take him there. Topping his class in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examinations. Joining the University of Nairobi. Villagers back home holding fundraisers to keep him in university. Eating leftovers in university because on some days he could not afford a meal. Graduating with a first class honours degree in physics and mathematics – the first in eight years. Winning a scholarship to the University of Cambridge to study for a master's degree in microelectronic engineering and semiconductor device physics. Winning another scholarship to the University of Surrey in the UK for a PhD in the same field as his master's.

By this point, he is a man who can look into the inside of an electronic product and tell where it is likely to get sick. Or where those who made it did the best job. Then the dots of his story pass through a point where he gets his PhD at 29 years and becomes a professor at 35.

That age of 35 should dovetail into the year 2005, when he had finished his studies and started teaching. He started off as a lecturer at Kabarak University and it did not take long before he was promoted to senior lecturer.

"Then I became head of the Department of Computing and Mathematics. Within a short while, I was appointed the founding dean of the School of Science, Engineering and Technology at Kabarak University," he tells *Higher Education*.

In 2009, he moved to Kenya Methodist University to head the Department of Information Technology. He admits with a wry smile that he was "poached". A year later, he was appointed the principal of the Nairobi campus.

"I was overseeing four campuses of Kemu. That was in Mombasa, Nyeri, Nakuru, and Nairobi," he says.

He held the position between 2010 and 2015 when he branched out to Riara University. Again, this was 'poaching', he admits with an even broader smile.

Since then, he has been the vice

chancellor of the institution that is part of the schooling empire built by veteran educationists Daniel and Ed-dah Gachukia.

"They've entrusted us now to continue with their legacy, to safeguard that legacy," says Prof Gateru of the couple.

He is talking to us in a spacious boardroom at the university's main campus. He oozes a business-like yet approachable personality. Humorous yet deep. Reflective at times and spontaneous at others.

So, how does a mathematician and physicist, who should be worrying about circuits and silicon and electric currents and all, become the head of a university?

"Leadership is unique," he answers. "It calls for very many diverse skills. The beauty of sciences, especially mathematics and engineering, is that you're trained to think logically. You're trained to look for facts, you work with facts."

We are talking at a time when the higher education space in Kenya is generating headlines on many fronts. The University of Nairobi is undergoing a rebirth of sorts, with its council having collapsed its colleges into faculties, reorganised staff and increased fees, among other changes.

It is also not too long since 450 students graduated from Riara University, their highest number to ever get

their powers to read in one cohort. We ask Prof Gateru what he thinks about the issue of private universities like Riara being allocated students by the Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service. Is it a blessing to such institutions?

For starters, he says, the government-allocated students to Riara University make up only 20 percent of the total population. The current enrolment is about 1,450.

**Employers and the society are telling universities that they're producing half-baked graduates, but nobody is asking what the true cost of producing a fully-baked graduate is**

Prof Gateru



He studied micro-electronic engineering and semiconductor device physics. LUCY WANJIRU / NATION

## PhD at 29 years, professor at 35 years: The inspiring story of Prof Robert Gateru

"Each institution is free to declare the spaces they want. So, we normally take just a reasonable number mainly because of the fee implications. We are not able to subsidise for so many others," he says.

The issue of fees gets him talking passionately. He wants the government to revert to the use cut-off points to determine university admission instead of taking in all candidates who score a C+ and above in KCSE. He observes that what the government pays for students in some programmes is "about a third of what we charge".

"We can't charge the student more than they would pay if they were to go to a public university. We are not allowed to charge anything extra. That has caused a lot of disruptions in the finances and cash flows of universities," he said.

With a chuckle, Prof Gateru notes that because university fees have not been revised for long, some university programmes cost way cheaper than getting primary school education.

"University fees have remained the same for the last 30 years. It's important for us as a country to have a serious conversation about the funding of university education because on the one hand, you have the employers and the society telling universities that 'you're producing half-

baked graduates', but nobody is asking, 'What is the true cost of producing a fully-baked graduate?' To produce and train a fully-baked graduate at that high level is expensive. Quality is expensive."

The professor says that the university has achieved what he calls "total stability".

"That is from both a financial perspective and also a regulatory perspective. We've been able to get all the necessary accreditations for the institution for all our programmes. From a financial perspective, even with Covid-19, we were able to break even while many institutions are struggling, we were able to break even," he says, noting that the institution will venture into offering master's courses from later this year.

As an expert in semiconductors, we also pick his mind about the factories recently set up in the country to produce the vital items in the manufacture of electronics.

"It's a good start. We are already assembling laptops in several of our universities. When those institutions now start ordering ICs from these factories, we're on the road to making our own completely autonomous laptops and other electronic devices. We have to start somewhere."

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