

REVIEW ARTICLE

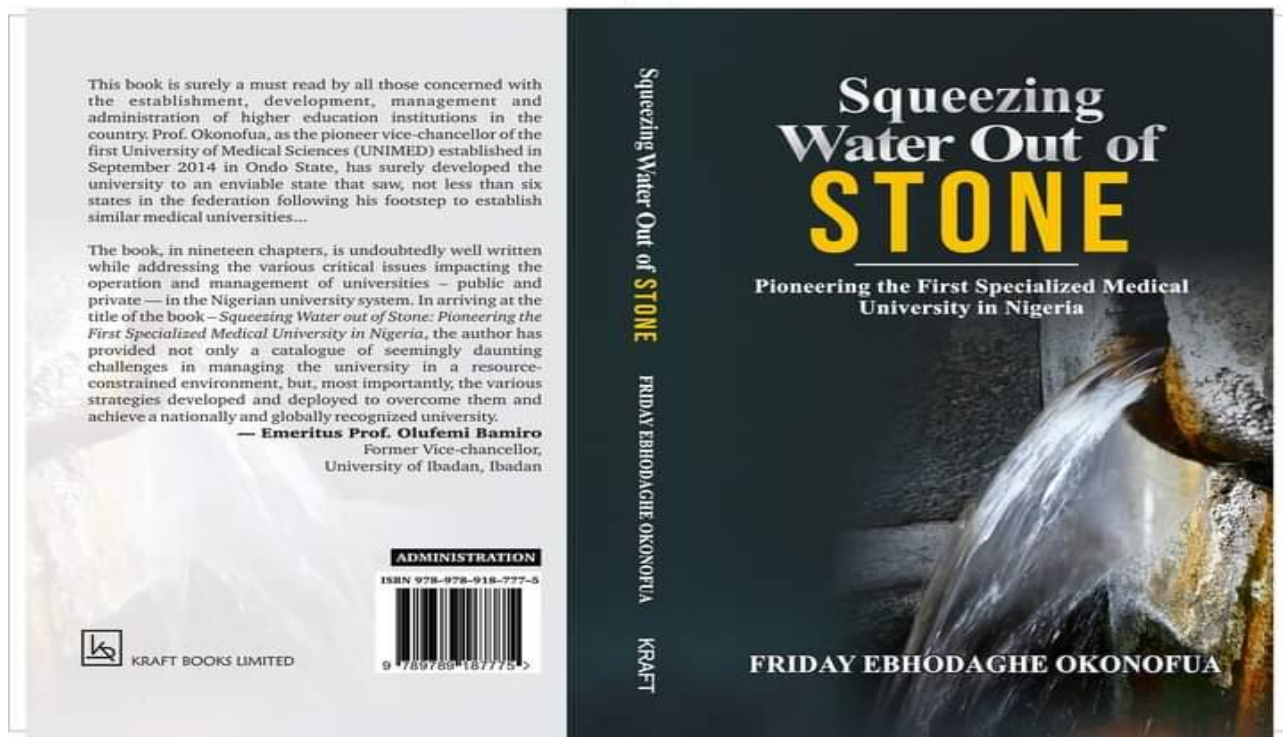
Squeezing Water Out of Stone, Pioneering the First Medical University in Nigeria by Friday Okonofua: A book review

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The induction of the first set of medical doctors produced by the University of Medical Sciences (UNIMED), Ondo City, Nigeria on June 9, 2023 is the climax of the series of graduation ceremonies for graduates of this young university which began in December 2019 when graduates in disciplines related to medicine but whose lengths of study are shorter than the period for medicine have been awarded the relevant degrees. These ceremonies bear eloquent testimony to the quality of instructions in the approved programmes by relevant regulatory authorities; the adequacy of facilities; the stability of the academic calendars and the dedication of

all staff, teaching and non-teaching, and the management comprising the principal officers, the leader of whom is the author of the book being presented today. With the university's record of achievements, the question then is where did the pioneer Vice-Chancellor, Professor Friday Ebhodaghe Okonofua derive the inspiration for the title of his memoirs, "Squeezing Water Out of Stone: Pioneering the First Medical University in Nigeria"? This book published by Kraft Book Limited with ISBN 978-978-918-777-5 is one of a few books ever written by a pioneer Vice-Chancellor in any of Nigeria's Universities.

In this uncommon book review, I prefer to begin by helping the prospective reader who may not have the luxury of time, go straight to where the answer to my question is. A companion reading of Chapters 6, 11 and 12 will be useful. Chapter 6 is titled: “Birthing the Baby: Obtaining Institutional Approval from the National Universities Commission (NUC)”; Chapter 11 is titled: “Infrastructural Development”; and Chapter 12 is titled: “Engendering Sustainable Funding”.

The signs that the managers of UNIMED might have to “squeeze water out of stone” manifested immediately upon the appointment in March 2015 of the principal officers of the university by the government of Ondo State, led at the time by Dr Olusegun Mimiko, a professional colleague of Professor Okonofua’s with years of friendship and collaboration dating back to their university days at the then University of Ife, Ile-Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University). As noted by the author,

A shocking observation at the first meeting was that the State Government had made no substantial plans for the University. We had expected to see a document relating to an implementation plan, but the Commissioner could provide none. Indeed, no preliminary implementation committee had been put in place to discuss and make recommendations on how the University should be administered. It appeared they expected that the new VC and the Registrar would do everything, which in some ways was good as it enabled us to put our perspectives on ground in creating the University. On the other hand, this became a challenging and daunting process as we were encumbered by the lack of supporting and enabling frameworks to do the work effectively. For example, there was no accommodation for the VC and the Registrar, and no single office space was shown to us. Furthermore, there was no single starting fund given to us, which meant that between March and July 2015 when we were given some funds, we ran the offices and moved around with our personal funds.

However, the Commissioner showed us a dishevelled bungalow at one of the top elevations of the campus, which he said,

would be re-designed and furnished as the VC’s office and offices for senior members of staff. Indeed, this process was not completed until August 2015, and we had to use considerable engineering ingenuity to remodel the building to ensure its best use, as no other office space was available. Thus, as the renovation of the office space was going on, we worked from our individual cars, but also from the boardroom of the Chief Medical Director of the Trauma Centre, Dr. Ige, who generously donated the room for our meetings.

This period tested our resilience, patience, and commitment. Some others would have given up, but we were determined to make the project a success, as we believed history was being made. I was also lucky to have had Dr. Funke Oyebade as Registrar, companion, and adviser. She did not complain on any one occasion, and we agreed that we were foundation builders who must endure great inconveniences while developing the institution. [pp.62-63]

A better appreciation of the constraints that the managers of UNIMED had to put up with is provided in Chapter 11 titled: “Infrastructural Development”. At the end of Prof Okonofua’s tenure in March 2020, “the university had campuses and landmasses in three locations: the Laje Campus, Odosida Campus and Akure Campus. These campuses were developed through “purposeful acts of commitment, determination and honesty”.

Initially, it was the Medical Village, otherwise known as the Laje Campus that was designated by the state government as the site of the university.

The Medical Village consisted of four different administrative units—the Trauma Centre, the Mother and Child Hospital, Kidney Care Centre, and the Gani Fawehinmi Diagnostic Centre. A medical director headed each unit—but with the establishment of the university, it was expected that the units would be merged and come under the administrative structure of the university. However...this turned out not to be the case due to indecision on the part of the government and several political pranks that developed. [pp. 130-131]

From a budget of N200million submitted by the university management to the office of the Governor there was approval for N110million, “but efforts to get the funds transferred to the accounts of the university failed.” And until the author “left the university as VC, the funds were neither transferred, nor was the statement of expenditure of the funds forwarded to the university despite several reminders”. According to the author, throughout his tenure as VC, “the only infrastructural development funds the university received from the Ondo State Government was the N250 million...received from Governor Rotimi Akeredolu in 2018 for building a new Faculty of Clinical Sciences. Unfortunately, these funds were never utilized during my tenure due to bottlenecks placed in the process by the second Governing Council of the university.” So, between take-off and 2018, infrastructures for the university were developed from internally-generated revenue and proceeds from fund-raising. Unfortunately, after expending much of the meager resources generated on developing facilities in the Laje Campus ahead of NUC resource verification visit, the author notes that “something unusual happened.” It was a marching order from the Governor, conveyed through the Commissioner for Health, that the university should move from the Laje Campus to the Odosida Campus. As noted by the author,

The Odosida campus initially designated to be a model primary school in Ondo City was then being constructed, and was at only about 60% completion stage. The contractor of the Odosida site was never seen on site; the building had not been painted; not connected to main grid electricity; many of the offices had not been demarcated for use; and it was evident that the site had been abandoned for years. Yet, the University was expected to move from the Medical building to this uncompleted site with immediate effect. [pp. 134-135]

Needless to say, all attempts to get the government to change the relocation order failed. And the university management had to “begin again” with remodeling the facilities in Odosida to serve its purpose. And to think that the state government “informed the university that they

had no funds to support the renovation of the Odosida Campus”! It’s remarkable that the VC succeeded in ‘infecting’ the staff with his determination to succeed and turn things around; ultimately successfully made the Odosida campus a reality “without a single funding support from the government”. The details of the structures built are contained in Chapter 11. But I consider it needful to single out a generous benefactor, Chief I F Akintade who not only provided the funds used in constructing the building complex housing the Dentistry and Pathology faculties but also “personally supervised the construction”. The project was done in four months and it was commissioned for use in December 2017. Other donors of facilities were “Friends of UNIMED”, an Honourable Member of the House of Representatives, Joseph Akinlaja and the TETFUND. The quantum of support and the utilization are detailed in the book.

When due allowance is made for a faithful acknowledgement of revenues from government subventions and school fees, it is clear that the approved funds received were paltry compared to the needs of the university. But they managed “in ways that ensured that [the university] never had any budget deficit during the tenure of the author. It need be stressed that “no capital vote for infrastructural development came in until 2018:; three years after the establishment of the university. The additional sources of income for the university, detailed in the book but which I will just highlight here are:

1. Ondo State Government subventions.
2. Friends of UNIMED Fund (FUF) --a cohort of friends of the university who make regular, affordable and determined financial contributions towards the implementation of specific projects in the university. It is fair to note that FUF included staff of the university.
3. The Tertiary Education Trust Fund.
4. The Federal Ministry of Education Needs Assessment Funding.
5. Grants by agencies like the Ford Foundation; Seedlings Lab; and African Centre of Excellence in Reproductive Health Innovation.
6. School Fees.
7. Donations from local and international organisations.

It is proper, at this juncture to acknowledge the not-inconsiderable material support that the university got from older-established sister institutions domiciled in Ondo, especially the Adeyemi College of Education and the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, NIEPA. The details of their benefactions need not be detailed us here but the author is immensely grateful to the leadership of the two federal institutions.

Lest the impression be gained that “Squeezing Water Out of Stone” is a book of lamentations, I make haste to say not quite. It is indeed full of gratitude and details of achievements and part of the evidence is today’s induction ceremony for the first set of the medical doctors produced by the university.

The author is eternally grateful to the founder-Governor of UNIMED, HE Dr Olusegun Mimiko, who by appointing him VC not only wiped away his years-long tears following his many failed attempts at becoming VC in many federal universities [see Chapter 4 for details], but also gave him a historic opportunity to write his name in gold by pioneering the first specialised university of medicine in Nigeria. Governor Mimiko literally handed his friend a *tabula rasa* on which to write out his ideas about governing a university and making a success of the endeavour. Apart from Governor Mimiko, the author also has generous mention of the numerous colleagues who lent him their shoulders, in various ways, as he fashioned the bricks and blocks towards actualising his dream of producing graduates of quality. The processes involved in preparing the academic briefs, the curriculums for the various programmes and passing the accreditation requirements of the various regulatory governmental and professional agencies involved the cooperation of numerous colleagues. And the invaluable help from the first governing council of the university, headed by one of Nigeria’s finest medical educators, Emeritus Professor OO Akinkugbe (since deceased) is gratefully acknowledged. Apart from the management, other academic and administrative staff are duly celebrated for their labour of love.

And what was it about Professor Okonofua’s background that prepared him for the task of pioneer VC of UNIMED? The reader is

encouraged to go to Chapters 1-5 which deal with the period up to the appointment; and then Chapters 6- 10 on aspects of his management style and university governance. Relatedly, the reader can go on to read Chapters 13 – 15.

Professor Okonofua had a robust medical education at the then University of Ife and true to his teenage ambition, he went on to develop himself as a researcher and a medical educator. He grew a research centre in the course of which he learnt to obtain and responsibly manage research grants. After years of holding positions of responsibility as a medical educator within academia and at the professional level, he joined the race for vice-chancellor in a number of universities but without success. Eventually, he got the job to lead the managers of the first university of medicine in Nigeria at UNIMED.

I doubt that the author will forgive me if I neglect to highlight his governance philosophy as VC as encapsulated in what he calls the Transparency, Effectiveness, Accountability and Anti-Corruption agenda, TEAA. The details are in Chapters 8, 17, 18 and 19. In summary, the TEAA was what Professor Okonofua used “to establish the key foundational principles in governing the university”. From the management of men and materials, within and outside the university; the administration of student affairs; the raising and utilisation of funds; the development of programmes of study and the general pursuit of the overall goal of growing a 21st century specialised university, he was guided by this TEAA philosophy. And he led from the front.

The reader is encouraged to read closely the author’s assessment of how well the TEAA worked for him in his leadership of UNIMED in Chapter 19. While he held the forte, the author notes that he,

...used every opportunity to discuss and narrate the TEAA agenda throughout my tenure in the University, with the hope that it will stimulate positive compliance and acceptance among all stakeholders as necessary to build a new and forward-looking institution. To my surprise, it resulted in many unexpected and interesting outcomes, which are necessary to narrate to guide future implementation of this kind of policy in the University system.”

He goes on to “take each of these principles and examine how they were implemented, and the resulting outcomes and consequences in terms of results, outcomes, consequences, and challenges. I encourage the young doctors being inducted today, and who are the icing on the cake of Professor Okonofua’s leadership experiments at UNIMED, to grab a copy each as they leave this venue so that they can appreciate the exertions of those who labored to make them what they have become. And who knows, their assessment of their experience could come in handy when the author prepares a second edition of this book. As I end this time-constrained review of “Squeezing Water Out of Stone”, I suggest that a

less-emotive but appropriate title for this excellent memoir of trials and triumphs would be “When Opportunity Met Preparedness”.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I wholeheartedly recommend this 328-page book for your reading pleasure.

Conflict of interest: Professor Kemi Rotimi read this review of the book (as book reviewer) during the induction of the first graduated medical doctors of UNIMED into the medical profession by the Registrar of the Medical and Dental Council of Nigeria (MDCN), Dr TAB Sanusi on June 9, 2023.