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I want to help support my family

Vincent Nzouke, an ebullient, enthusiastic final year student of IIT tells the story of his life in the school and what it means for him. He is full of hope for his future, that of his family and for Nigeria. It is not difficult to share in his infectious enthusiasm especially with the simplicity with which he describes things for us.

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My name is Vincent Nzouke; I am half Togolese, half Nigerian because although my parents are from Togo, I was born in Nigeria where they emigrated years before my birth.

Mine is a polygamous home because my father has two wives. I therefore have eleven siblings, four from my mother and another six from my step-mother. Of course, my father's job as a gold smith means that we are a very low income household, which my mother tries to supplement with some petty trading.

Studying at IIT came as the perfect solution to my life situation. After my primary schooling at the Estate Baptist Primary school here in Lagos, I went on to a Moslem secondary school, Zumratu Islamiya High School where I graduated with one of the best results: 5 Distinctions; 2 Credits and 1 Pass. The next logical thing would then have been to expect me to go on to university. Thinking

along that line, I had nursed the ambition, first of becoming a medical doctor and later on of studying Computer Engineering. Reality however told me that this might not be, mainly due to my coming from a very poor family. There was no way my parents would be able to pay my way through a university education.

I got to know about IIT through my contact with a centre of Opus Dei in Surulere called Helmbridge Study Centre where I was going to meet with other school-leavers for some Leadership Activities being organized there. There I met Obinna, then already a student of IIT. The more I got told about the school, the more attractive it became especially on one point: the short 3-year programme and the assurance of almost-immediate employment meant that in a short time, I could get a job and begin to help my parents support my family. This contrasted

hugely with the reality in Nigeria where university graduates often spend years of job-searching in our overstretched national economy.

IIT also had the unique trait of being set up precisely to help the less privileged like myself, with the training almost completely subsidized. The fact of an engineering profession being only my second choice did not scare me off IIT, because I was assured that the school was prepared to teach you all you needed to know even if they had to begin from “zero”.

Both my parents were happy with what I had found out for myself. I remember that I had a man-to-man talk with my dad to give him more details about IIT and why I wanted to go there. He gave me his support, both verbally and also in helping me fulfill the minimum financial requirements. I understand that it

takes about two hundred thousand (N200, 000) annually to train a student at IIT, all of which is borne by the school and individual and corporate sponsors. This means that education for the IIT student is entirely free. I know this because a year ago, two officials from one of the sponsoring non-governmental organizations (NGO) came to my house (as a beneficiary) to acquaint themselves more with my background. They even took some photographs, some of which I still have.

However, to ensure some commitment from the families involved, the student is required to annually make a “commitment fee” of ten thousand naira (N10,000), an amount so small as to be merely symbolic. Small it might seem, but for my family, in the economic situation we find ourselves, this yearly contribution is a huge

sacrifice. This was another area where I received great support from my dad. I had personal savings of my own, and between my dad and my mum, we were able to get enough to pay this commitment fee.

For me, IIT is a real “home” because this is how welcome the place and the people there make you feel. I know that IIT is there to help me to be a good person, for myself and my family. I remember telling myself, “This is like a stepping stone for Vincent; to help his family and to go ahead in life”. After what I had been told by my old friends like Obinna and Olumide about the place, I think that the reality matched the concept I had formed in my mind. “Are you telling me that when I finish from IIT, I will be employable? Then, count me in!”

I am very enthusiastic about IIT and I can tell you that so many things we

do and have here do not exist anywhere else, at least not in institutions similar to ours. IIT gives you hands-on practical experience because apart from being taught the theory, we have the tools, machines and equipment to see the teachings “come alive”. A second factor that differentiates IIT from other technical schools is the emphasis here on ethical values which they try to impart to the students. You are taught that on the “factory floor” you should not only aim to simply “clock” your presence and make money, but to work and work well. You ought to work with intensity such that your employer can affirm that you have indeed done a good job for him, without having to call you to re-do a poorly performed assignment. From what I know, Work Ethics as a subject is not offered in other technical schools in Nigeria, but in IIT, it is one of the main courses we do.

As part of our training (the dual-tech method), we alternate time between the school and the factory floor of participating companies. Thus I have had opportunities to see the effect of Work Ethics (or the lack of it) in some of the industries. A typical factory has people from different backgrounds, training and belief-systems. Like I said earlier, some people come in, “clock-in” their presence but do no work, to cheat their employer. There was an incidence in one factory of a missing pump, which in fact was stolen by an employee and sold to get money. The people involved tried to justify the act by saying that their employers do not pay them enough and that what they were doing was simply getting their own back. Of course, what we have been taught in the Work Ethics course make one aware that all this is wrong and cannot be justified, and I have done my best to help my fellow workers also understand this.

Sometimes I may think I am not having any effect on them, but that is until one day, one of the factory managers under whom I was training admitted to me in more or less these words: “Fine, I’ve learnt so many things from you, but I won’t tell you which ones, so that you don’t become proud!”

Much of this I think is due to the presence of Opus Dei in IIT. As you know, Opus Dei is an institution of the Catholic Church that promotes the search for holiness through work well done and offered to God.

Although it does not own IIT (which belongs to an NGO called ADF – African Development Foundation), it does provide the spiritual and moral aspects of the formation given to the students. Some of the teachers in IIT are members of Opus Dei and I think that they are able to help our moral life because of what they themselves have learnt. For example, they help

us to realize that it is not everything that seems generally accepted in society that is necessarily correct. We have to be mindful of what we do because first of all, we are children of God, and God will not be happy if we do not do our work (including observing ethics) according to his Will, which is doing it perfectly well. You are taught to hold your own in the midst of society, even when the tide is moving in a different direction. People outside notice all these things and they often comment on how “IIT products” are different from the other guys.

That is not the only difference. Even in the technical courses, I think IIT stands out. For example, we have courses on PLCs (Programmable Logic Control); the use of Inverters, Industrial Automation, etc. In fact, I tell my friends that regarding the standard that IIT has, it can only be compared with technical schools

abroad. Pardon me if I seem to praise it too much, but that is my experience!

Another unique feature in the IIT education system is that it is not possible for a student to give his best in class when he has problems that may be hampering his concentration. And so we have the **Tutorial** System whereby every student has the opportunity of having a teacher as “friend” with whom he shares his problems, receive advice, so that one can enter the class with peace of mind, and understand what is being taught. It is as well that this is so because the academic standards in IIT are very high. Can you imagine that the pass-mark in all exams is 60% and in some subjects 70%!? This tough learning condition and environment prepares the student for the different kinds of challenges he is likely to face out there in the real world, with deadlines, etc.

I will like to finish this write-up with advice for two groups of people: the government and parents.

I think that the government should look into the educational system as a whole and give priority to technical education, which has been the springboard for development in many countries. Technical education leads to many people who are self-employed, which is a great need in Nigeria today. Imagine that you have 10,000 self-employed people in an area. This is going to lead to a reduction in crime rate, a boom in the economy and then the much-touted poverty-alleviation by government would have been achieved.

To parents, I would ask them to be supportive of their children in whatever career or life choices they make. In this, I have been fortunate with my parents who supported my

decision to go to IIT, even when going to the university was the craze among my mates. I remember one fellow who really wanted to go to IIT but his father was against it.

Although he had resumed with us and was enjoying it, his father insisted so much that at the end, the boy had to withdraw. My thinking is that if someone's heart is in one field of human endeavor and yet is forced into another, one might be compromising his happiness and fulfillment.

People should watch out for IIT in years to come. I believe that it is really going to bring a lot of changes in Nigeria. There are now many companies that have employed plenty IIT graduates and we hear they keep writing to the school requesting for more. Why? Because they see a difference in IIT products: "This guy has ethical values; he has the skill and he's dedicated and

committed to his work”, they all say.
In 10 years to come, the whole world
would have heard of IIT!

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