I want to help support my family

Vincent Nzouke is an enthusiastic final year student of the Institute for Industrial Technology (IIT) in Lagos, Nigeria, a school started in 2002 on the Centenary of the birth of St. Josemaria. Vincent tells of his experiences at the school and how it has given him hope for the future: his own, his family's and Nigeria's.

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My name is Vincent Nzouke. My parents are from Togo but I was born in Nigeria, so I am half Togolese and half Nigerian. Mine is a polygamous home, because my father has two wives. I have eleven siblings, four from my mother and six from my step-mother. My father's work 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, where I graduated with one of the best results: 5 Distinctions; 2 Credits and 1 Pass. The logical thing would be to go on to university, and I had nursed the ambition, first of becoming a medical doctor and later of studying Computer Engineering. Reality, however, told me that this

might not be, mainly due to being from a very poor family. There was no way my parents could pay for a university education.

I got to know about IIT through my contact with a centre of Opus Dei in Surulere called Helmbridge Study Centre, which was organizing Leadership Activities for school-leavers like me. There I met Obinna, who was a student at IIT. The more I heard about IIT, the more attractive it became, especially its short 3-year programme. The assurance of almost-immediate employment meant that I could soon get a job and begin to help my parents support my family. In Nigeria university graduates often spend years of job-searching in our overstretched national economy.

IIT is set up precisely to help the less privileged like myself, and the training there is almost completely

subsidized. The fact that engineering was only my second choice did not scare me off, because IIT is prepared to teach you all you need to know, even if they have to begin "from zero."

Both my parents were happy with what I had found for myself. 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, and even helped me fulfill the minimum financial requirements. I understand that it takes about N200, 000/year to train a student at IIT. All of this is borne by the school and sponsors, both individual and corporate. So the education for the IIT student could be entirely free. However, to ensure some commitment from the families involved, the student is required to make a "commitment fee" of N10,000/year. While this small amount is symbolic, for my family it is a huge

sacrifice. Here again 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.

IIT is a real "home" for me, because this is how welcoming the place and the people are. 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". I discovered that what I had been told by my old friends like Obinna and Olumide matched reality. "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 other

technical schools like ours. IIT gives you hands-on practical experience, because in addition to the theory, we have the tools, machines and equipment to see the teachings "come alive". A second distinctive factor is the emphasis on ethical values which they try to impart to the students. You are taught that on the "factory floor" you should not aim simply to "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 is not offered in other technical schools in Nigeria, but in IIT it is one of the main courses.

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 been able 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. Some people come, "clock-in," but do no work, and so cheat their employer. In one factory there was a "missing" pump, which actually an employee stole and sold. The people involved tried to justify the act by saying that their employers did not pay them enough and that they were simply getting their own back. Of course, 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 think I am not having any effect on them, but one day, one of the factory managers under whom I was training admitted to me: "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 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 realize that not everything that is generally accepted in society is necessarily correct. We have to watch 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 if it means going againt the tide. People outside notice all these things and they often comment on how "IIT products" are different from 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 is the the **Tutorial** System. A student cannot give his best in class when he has problems 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, etc. In this way he can come to class with peace of mind, and understand what is being taught. This is a good thing, since 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.

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 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." In 10 years, the whole world will have heard of IIT!

Vincent Nzouke, Institute for Industrial Technology (IIT), Lagos