

## Interview with the Vice-Chancellor

**Date:** 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2025

**Venue:** Vice-Chancellor's Office, NOUN

### **Attendance:**

#### *Interviewee*

1. Professor Olufemi Peters – Vice-Chancellor

#### *Interview Team*

2. Professor Christine Ofulue – Deputy Vice-Chancellor
  3. Professor Dorothy Ofoha – Director, RETRIDOL
  4. Felix K. Olakulehin – Research Fellow, RETRIDOL
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## **Introduction**

This interview with the outgoing Vice-Chancellor, Professor Olufemi Peters, was conducted by the editorial team of WAJOFEL to document the lived-experiences, reflections, and institutional leadership practices that have shaped the development of open and distance learning during his superintendence of NOUN between February 2021 and February 2026. The rationale for this interview is grounded in the recognition that formal policy documents and institutional reports often do not capture the human, reflective and contextual dimensions of academic leadership. Reporting in the vice-chancellor's first-person account, the following transcript foregrounds his personal academic journey, leadership philosophy, and stewardship experiences, offering rich insights into the realities of managing a complex ODL institution in the Nigerian context. The interview is particularly significant because it situates leadership within broader national challenges, including public perceptions of ODL, regulatory constraints, funding limitations, quality assurance imperatives, and the pursuit of social justice through expanded educational access. It also provides an ethno-historical understanding of how leadership practices evolve over time, shaped by



disciplinary training, professional challenges, mentorship, and institutional learning. Beyond its historical value, it is hoped that this interview would serve as a resource for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners interested in higher education leadership, ODL systems, and institutional transformation in Africa.

## **A. Milestones in Academic Journey and Career**

*1. Could you walk us through the key milestones that have shaped your academic journey from your early years to your appointment as Vice-Chancellor?*

My journey into academia was not planned. Like many Nigerians from modest middle-class backgrounds, there were clear expectations about what one should study. My parents wanted me to read medicine, while I wanted to study mechanical engineering. Unfortunately, my results at the A-Level stage did not meet the requirements for either option. At that point, my overriding goal was simply to gain admission into a university. I was oscillating between any programme that would take me into the university. I was initially admitted to the University of Benin to study Agricultural Science. However, that period coincided with intense crises between the university management and students. I felt unsettled and realised that many of my peers were studying elsewhere, particularly at the University of Ibadan. I made enquiries, and it emerged that there had been an error in the transmission of my results. Once that was corrected, I was admitted to study Chemistry at the University of Ibadan. Meanwhile, I was warned that the programme was demanding and that many students spent extra years due to failure, but I told myself that it would not happen to me. I worked hard and ended up graduating with a Second Class Upper. In retrospect, studying Chemistry gave me an analytical mind. It trained me to observe, analyse evidence, and draw logical conclusions. These habits have been invaluable throughout my administrative career. In fact, I usually joke that most chemists make good administrators; we are trained to think deeply and make deductions based on facts.

After my first degree, it was clear that remaining in Chemistry within the Nigerian context meant pursuing an academic career. Industrial



opportunities were limited, and teaching at the secondary school level was not appealing to me. I, therefore, proceeded directly into postgraduate studies and completed my PhD relatively early. From that point, I knew that my ambition was to become a professor. I approached that goal strategically. I studied the promotion criteria carefully and set clear publication targets. However, my first attempt at promotion to Lecturer I was unsuccessful because some of my papers had been accepted but not yet published. That experience was deeply humbling. It wounded my pride, but it also sharpened my resolve. I decided that I would never again submit for promotion without fully published works. Within two years, I met the requirements and continued steadily until I attained the rank of Professor.

2. *What were the key moments or turning points that shaped your transition into the various leadership roles you have held (dean, director, DVC, ED, VC)?*

The first major turning point in my career was my appointment as General Coordinator for the School of General and Remedial Studies at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. I was responsible for coordinating the 100-level students, preparing timetables across faculties, and managing both lectures and examinations. It was an enormous logistical challenge. I approached the task analytically, treating it almost like a chemical problem: identifying variables, constraints, and optimal solutions. The timetable system that I designed proved so effective that it remained in use long after I left the position. I held that role for ten years, during which I interacted extensively with senior administrators across the university. That exposure was invaluable. It gave me visibility, confidence, and a practical understanding of institutional governance. At the same time, my administrative responsibilities complemented my academic work. I learnt how to manage people, negotiate competing interests, and deliver results under pressure. These experiences laid the foundation for my later leadership roles.

The second major turning point in my career was my transition to the Open University. It came at a time when I was frustrated at ABU because, despite having enough publications for a professorship,



politics and institutional barriers held me back. When I joined NOUN, I found a new sense of purpose. I quickly grasped the concept and philosophy of Open and Distance Learning, even faster than some education specialists. The mentorship of Professor Olugbemiro Jegede was pivotal; he saw my passion, trusted my abilities, and exposed me to various leadership roles that eventually prepared me for the position of Vice-Chancellor.

3. *How have your scholarly and administrative experiences complemented each other throughout your career?*

My background in Chemistry sharpened my logic and problem-solving skills, while administration taught me creativity and innovation. I am never satisfied with routine processes; I always look for ways to improve efficiency. These two sides — the analytical and the innovative — have complemented each other throughout my career and shaped my leadership style.

**B. Journey and Perspective on Open and Distance Learning (ODL)**

4. *What ignited your interest in Open and Distance Learning, and how has your interest evolved over the years?*

My first contact with ODL dates to 1983 when the Open University was first established in Nigeria. At the time, I was a young master's student, and my professor invited me to write a course for them. I declined because my social life mattered more to me then than sitting down to develop course materials at the time. But later, around 1988, I got deeply involved in a project at ABU funded by the MacArthur Foundation, which aimed to harmonise course content across faculties. I was drawn into the committee largely through the confidence of senior colleagues in my analytical abilities. Through that project, I was introduced to the philosophy of open and distance learning, particularly the idea that knowledge could be systematically designed, packaged, and delivered to learners independent of time and place. I found this deeply intriguing. It challenged my assumptions about teaching and learning.



My move to the Open University came at a time of considerable professional frustration. Despite meeting the criteria for promotion to professor at my former institution, institutional politics delayed my advancement. When the opportunity arose to join the Open University, I saw it as both an escape and a new beginning. The first six months I spent there were the most fulfilling of my working life. The environment was corporate, focused, and purpose-driven. ODL came naturally to me. It aligned with my earlier experiences, including my use of correspondence courses during my A-Level studies in the 1970s, although I had not previously recognised those experiences as relevant. Years later, when I encountered Professor Olugbemiro Jegede, my interest in ODL was reignited and solidified. He had a remarkable clarity of vision about what ODL could become. I immersed myself in the theory and practice of distance education. Under his mentorship, I read widely, including foundational texts such as those by Otto Peters, whose systems-based approach resonated strongly with my scientific training. When I joined the National Open University of Nigeria writing workshop at Lokoja, I found the system easy to adapt to. I discovered the social justice embedded in ODL, the ability to reach those who otherwise would never have access to higher education. I also realised that I had unknowingly been a distance learner myself when I subscribed to Rapid Success correspondence courses for my A-Levels in the 1970s. These experiences made me fully appreciate the power and reach of ODL.

5. *In what ways has ODL expanded access and transformed educational opportunities during your tenure, in view of the need to strike a balance between quality assurance and access in the ODL system?*

What struck me most was the social justice dimension of ODL. ODL offers social justice and democratisation of learning. It allows people who cannot attend traditional universities to still access quality education. It offered access to higher education for people who would never be admitted into conventional universities. I also realised that well-designed course materials could support deep learning, sometimes more effectively than traditional lectures. During my tenure, I strengthened our quality assurance processes by creating the



Directorate of Quality Assurance, developing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), and establishing our digital quality management platform.

While our course materials are world-class and quality-assured, the real challenge lies in delivery — ensuring that students can engage effectively and learn successfully. I believe ODL offers a more consistent learning experience than conventional universities, where quality varies widely between lecturers. At NOUN, every student reads the same content, ensuring equity and quality.

### **C. Challenges Encountered as Vice-Chancellor and How They Were Overcome**

6. *What were some of the most significant challenges you faced as Vice-Chancellor, and how did you address them? For example, how did you navigate institutional resistance or policy constraints in implementing new initiatives?*

When I became Vice-Chancellor, I knew that perception was one of the greatest challenges facing Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria. Many people regarded it as inferior, part-time, or suitable only for unserious students. There were also regulatory constraints, resistance from professional bodies, funding limitations, and internal capacity challenges. Addressing these issues required sustained advocacy and strategic engagement. We worked closely with regulatory agencies and secured targeted support from TETFund. We invested heavily in quality assurance, establishing a Directorate of Quality Assurance, developing Standard Operating Procedures, and introducing digital quality management systems. I firmly believe that ODL content is often superior to what is delivered in conventional universities because it is collaboratively developed, rigorously reviewed, and standardised. The real challenge lies in delivery and student engagement.



7. *Which personal qualities or leadership principles proved most critical in overcoming challenges during your tenure?*

The key personal qualities that helped me were focus, persistence, and innovation. I value focus, hard work, and innovation. I reflect deeply before making decisions and consult widely, but once a decision is taken, I pursue it with determination. I believe strongly in empowering people and trusting them with responsibility. To me, leadership is about creating systems that work and enabling others to succeed within those systems. My goodwill with government agencies and partners such as NUC and TETFund has been instrumental. Above all, I believe in empowering people, giving them responsibilities, and trusting them to deliver. That has been a cornerstone of my leadership.

#### **D. Legacies in the ODL Landscape**

8. *What key institutional or system-wide innovations would you consider your most lasting contributions to ODL? (e.g. digital transformation, strengthening learner support, research in ODL, capacity building for staff to understand the core principles of ODL)*

Among my most lasting contributions are the digital transformation of NOUN, improved quality assurance, and extensive capacity building for staff. We moved from paper-based processes to multimedia and online systems. I also promoted a culture of integrity and intellectual depth in leadership, which has earned NOUN greater respect globally.

9. *Which initiatives or reforms that have strengthened ODL practice and perception in Nigeria are you most proud of and hope will define your legacy? (e.g. support of ODeLAN)*

Among the contributions that I'm most proud of is our contribution to the establishment of ODeLAN — the Open and Distance Learning Association of Nigeria — and positioning NOUN as a major player in international ODL networks, including the ACDE and ICDE. Initiatives like the RETRIDOL monthly seminars have helped professionalise our ODL practice and created communities of practice



that will endure beyond individual tenures. These platforms have brought recognition to NOUN across Africa and beyond.

10. *What do you consider the most effective strategies for grooming future leaders in open and distance learning?*

To groom future leaders, we must invest in training and expose people to the philosophy of ODL. They should see ODL not just as a job, but as a social service. Being part of a community of practice helps — it keeps you learning, sharing, and improving.

### **E. A Note for the Next Vice-Chancellor**

11. *What advice would you give the incoming Vice-Chancellor to sustain and build upon your achievements in ODL delivery and institutional growth?*

My advice to the incoming Vice-Chancellor is simple: be focused, control the processes, remain fair, and empower your people. Let deans, directors, and staff perform their roles without interference. Recognise hard work, not sentiment. If you do this, you'll succeed.

12. *What cautionary lessons or insights from your tenure should the incoming Vice-Chancellor bear in mind?*

Every leader must have control over both human and financial resources. Everyone around you will want something, so you must be firm and fair. Avoid favouritism; let merit and performance guide your decisions. Above all, keep the institution's vision ahead of personal interest.

### **F. The Next Chapter**

13. *Looking back, which professional accomplishment gives you the greatest sense of fulfilment?*

Apart from being Vice-Chancellor, which is a great honour, receiving the ICDE Award is my proudest achievement. I've never been one to



chase awards, so this recognition means a lot to me. Being named a Fellow of ODeLAN alongside Professor Jegede is also deeply fulfilling.

14. *How do you see ODL developing in Nigeria and Africa over the next decade, and what are your thoughts on sustainability? (e.g., of dual and single-mode ODL institutions)*

ODL will inevitably continue to grow across Africa, driven by technology. The lines between conventional and distance learning are blurring, as both now use digital tools. I see micro-credentials and modular courses as the next major development — allowing learners to build qualifications progressively and flexibly. Eventually, universities will have to modularise their curricula to make learning more relevant and efficient.

15. *On a lighter note, as you leave the office, what personal or professional pursuits do you intend to focus on next?*

As I approach 70, I plan to relax a little and focus on research. I want to establish a chemistry laboratory, mentor students, and possibly venture into entrepreneurship — perhaps cleaning services and soap production. If appointed Emeritus Professor, I'll continue to support research and innovation at NOUN.

16. *What message would you like to leave for staff, students, and the broader ODL community?*

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to serve this great university. My message to staff and students is to continue striving for excellence and self-actualisation. NOUN was created to democratise education — may it continue to touch lives and uphold its mission of access, equity, and quality.



