

University Report

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- GWYNETH HENDERSON: In this week's 'University Report' how a University can contribute to improving food, cutting down on expensive imported food and providing food industries with much needed local manpower. Specifically I'm talking about a new department at the University of Ife, Nigeria, but the things that this Department of Food Science and Technology is concerned with of course apply everywhere! Well Akin Euba has been finding out about the new department from its head - Professor G.R. Howitt, first Akin asked -
- AKIN EUBA: Professor Howitt what do you see as your most important tasks in the Department of Food Science and Technology?
- PROFESSOR HOWITT: That is a very difficult question Mr. Euba, because there are various tasks. Any Department of Food Science must begin by generating information about local food stuffs. It must go on from there to indicate, or find out for itself, the nutrition of status of the people in the country, then it must look at the whole question of how much food is imported, how much food is made locally, and on that basis it then begins its main job which is to train young men and women in food science and technology and to develop specific research projects to help on the actual technology and the research that is going on already in the country.
- GWYNETH HENDERSON: Professor G.R. Howitt, head of Ife's Department of Food Science and Technology explaining the new departments tasks. So starting at the beginning of the list - finding out what the situation is and what the major problems are. Well the most publicised and discussed problem of food and feeding is, of course, malnutrition - or perhaps the problem of even when people do have enough bulk to eat they are not getting enough protien or vitamins to keep them healthy. So Akin asked Professor Howitt if in fact he thought this was the major problem in Nigeria.

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PROFESSOR HOWITT: I would not put first the problem of under-nutrition, there is a problem of under-nutrition. I would see, however, our major task, starting up in the new department that is, in developing better foods, foods which are acceptable to the local population and which can be made under Nigerian conditions. Take these two examples - there is already here quite a large meat processing industry, in the past traditionally meat has been prepared and sold under what must be described as rather poor hygienic conditions, there are a lot of sheep, goats and cows slaughtered and prepared for sale in villages and towns in conditions where undoubtedly there is quite serious potential contamination. I think that some of the frequent gastric upsets that people in Nigeria suffer from is due to the undesirable conditions under which meat is processed. That in my view is the first of the major problems. The second problem I would say at this stage is the very serious one of a short 'shelf' life in our products. For instance, there is a very very large sale of fresh fish and semi-processed fish. By semi-processed I mean fish which is smoked and partially dried. Now a great deal of fish, amounting I would expect to somewhere in total of about fifty thousand tons per annum, roughly one thousand tons of fish per week, is processed along the coastal line, on rivers and up in Lake Chad and in the new Kainji Lake which is of course the dam for the hydro-electric scheme. In all of these places fish is smoked and then sent on quite long journeys to the actual marketing centres. The problem is that by the time it gets there much of the fish is no longer in the best condition for eating, there tends to be some protein break-down giving it a rather strong and unpleasant flavour, and in addition to that it tends to get infested by different types of insects. I would very much like to see work being done, and I hope my department will undertake work on this important aspect of a more proper preservation of the fish which is caught in such large quantities around the coast and within the borders of Nigeria.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: And many other places too. Well it all sounds pretty revolutionary doesn't it? And immediately one's thinking how will the people react. So Akin asked Professor Howitt about social attitudes and the food science revolution they are leading.

PROFESSOR HOWITT: Food science is indeed a revolution, but on the other hand Nigeria is undergoing what I call a silent revolution with regard to eating habits. In towns a large number of young, married women with families go out to work, they do a good job in their offices, but when they come back it is still them who are charged with the responsibility of preparing an evening meal for their families and the next morning to prepare a meal

for the family before the children go to school and and husband goes to work. Under these conditions the young Nigerian woman has got to look for foods which are fairly easily processed and foods which probably her mother, and certainly her grandmother, never even thought of.

AKIN EUBA:

Apart from helping to perfect lines of development that already exists you've mentioned some of the foods that are already being processed, now can you see what potential there is for other foods that are not yet being processed to be processed in the near future?

PROFESSOR HOWITT:

There are quite a number of foods which I think will soon be prepared in this country, but which are not yet being prepared. It is worth noting that there is a very very wide range of foods already available but there are one or two areas which I'm surprised the food manufacturing industry has not already developed. One of these areas is the area of 'cornflakes', I suppose all the students in this university and students in other universities and students in high schools and so-on begin their first meal of the day with cornflakes, and at this present moment all the cornflakes which they consume are imported into the country. I would expect that this is one area where the food manufacturing people will go forward and produce Nigerian type of food. Another aspect that I'm quite convinced will need to be developed is the preparation of vegetables in some processed form. For instance, tomato puree, there is a very very large amount of tomato puree imported at the moment, and during some seasons of the year, especially in the dry season, tomatoes are hard to come by, and I can see a very considerable potential for firms which will make a good and acceptable tomato puree for use by the Nigerian population. To be fair there are at least two ex-patriate firms at the moment working on this project and undoubtedly once they get going, if they make a success of it, as they probably will, then other people will move into what could, I think, be a very profitable line of business for the food industry.

GWYNETH HENDERSON:

And, of course, the development of this kind of thing doesn't just produce internal profits for a country in terms of cash returns, or extra employment. It also cuts the amount of foods that are imported - and that means very considerable foreign exchange savings and profits for, in this case, Nigeria rather than for some European or American firm! This whole question is of great concern to Professor Howitt and his department as he explained to Akin Euba.

- PROFESSOR HOWITT: One of my colleagues has been working extensively during the past few months on the whole question of the cost and the volume of imported foods, and what has impressed this lady and me is the steep rise in the curve for imports. This is true of wheat, it's true of sugar, it's true of a wide range of canned food stuffs. Partly this is due to rising standards of living in Nigeria, and in consequence I feel that an indigenous Nigerian food industry could move into the processing of foods in a way that has not been possible in the country's history.
- AKIN EUBA: Professor Howitt, are there any legal controls for the protection of the consumer?
- PROFESSOR HOWITT: Now that's a very very good question indeed Mr. Akin Euba. At the present moment there are virtually no controls on what is put into food and on what is put on the labels to indicate the nature of the food stuff. Most countries now have quite well developed food legislation controlling the specific additions which can be made to food stuffs, the additions I refer to are of course to make pre-processing easier, and have also legislation governing the weights of package and also, of course, what may be claimed for the kind of food. At present Nigeria has no such legislation. I believe from government sources that legislation is ready, in draft, for some of these matters and no doubt this will come forward in the fairly near future. But as the food industry grows and as more and more money is spent on food this is an area in which the government will sooner or later want to take an active interest.
- GWYNETH HENDERSON: Food for thought for the future! And also looking to the future how is the Department of Food Science and Technology going to serve the food industry in terms of manpower - or as Akin put it -
- AKIN EUBA: Professor Howitt, you said earlier on that one of your main tasks is to train university graduates, are food industries in Nigeria happy about university graduates?
- PROFESSOR HOWITT: That I think could be described as a very sensitive area. I have talked to the heads of a large number of food concerns, and one of the problems seems to be this - that they find it hard to accept university graduates as effective members of their management teams. It's hard to pinpoint reasons why this should be so. I think that if some objective enquiry was made into the position, I'm not suggesting there should of course be such an enquiry, but if such an enquiry was made I think two things would emerge.

First the universities have perhaps not given all the thought they might have done to the specific tasks in the newer technologies that young graduates should be expected to perform, and sometimes young graduates have left the universities with a good honours degree in one of the other of the technologies, including food technology, and no one has told him that his first job, as he gets into a new position, is to learn that detail of how his particular industry operates. In that sense I think it is fair to say that the universities have not given this aspect of the training of young graduates in the technologies the backing that they should have had. The other side of the picture is, of course, this - that in my view some of the firms in the food industry have not given the young graduates the kind of training that they really ought to have had. In fact the food industry might have expected too much too soon from young graduates. Whatever the cause this disenchantment that has arisen between the technologies and industry is an area which must be bridged and I see one of my functions as an attempt to bridge this quite serious gap and to bring to an end this state of disenchantment with each other.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Professor G.R. Howitt, Head of the new Department of Food Science and Technology was talking there to Akin Euba on the campus of Ife University.

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