Beyond the Foreign Service

The Untapped Career Opportunities for International Relations Graduates

Full Speech delivered by Ajibola Oladiipo, Executive Director, Nigeria Food Security Project, at the NEXUS Conference and the Political and Diplomatic Students' Association, Bowen University, Iwo.

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Good morning, distinguished guests, members of the faculty, organisers of NEXUS, and the students gathered here today.

Before I get started, I want Rhoda, Chinelo, and Chimdi to please come out. I have a follow-up question to what you were talking about regarding being Vice-Chancellor for one week. You had a plan. Can you tell us what you think that would actually cost, not only financially but holistically?

Chimdi If I was the Vice-Chancellor for a week, it would cost a lot. Financially, trying to get highly qualified staff and new things costs a lot. But in other aspects, it would cost me myself. Putting myself into the system and making sure the school is going to be the best. It would cost my time, my energy, my resources, and my public relations.

Chinelo Talking about leaving a legacy, when you start thinking about renovations. Hostels, classrooms, the college, you need tests and everything. It takes a lot. You want to make an impact that covers the well-being of every student, from the streets to the chapel to everything.

Rhoda I mentioned that we are going to be student-centered. Some of the things students want are renovations of their common room, hostels, cafeteria, and college. Doing this would take a lot—every single part of the school. Financially, it's going to be a lot. Another implication is that it's not every single student that will agree on one thing, so a challenge is ignoring the minority to focus on what the majority wants.

Thank you so very much. You have all shared very laudable ideas. In as much as these are all valid, we are still beating around the bush. We are not hitting the specifics. Chinelo, you said something about roads. Do you have an idea of how much one kilometre of asphalt road costs?

Chimdi The last time the Principal tried to put asphalt on the road here, they measured the tip of the asphalt and said it is 30 million Naira.

To tar one standard kilometre of a road, you might spend nothing less than about 1.4 billion Naira. I'm pointing this out to show what some of these things cost. If you consider topography, soil types, and dredging, your school fees would have to increase, and nobody wants that. Oftentimes, when leaders come forward, they tell you what it costs to meet student expectations, and there are many things people might not be aware of beyond just the financials.

Having done that, good morning once again everybody. It's a pleasure to be here. I have been asked to speak on what happens beyond conventional career opportunities for graduates of International Relations. I know we have other departments here like Law and Political Science.

First and foremost, let me start with a shocker: I didn't study International Relations. I studied Food Technology. The art and science of everything you have to do with food. The first time I attended a political campaign, I was six years old. I sneaked out of my grandma's house to join a political rally and got disciplined for it. But that was the beginning. I have always loved politics; I read newspapers, followed elections, and had an exercise book where I recorded results from one state to another during the 2007 general elections.

Thank you to the NEXUS Team for this invitation.

I should begin with something you may not expect from someone invited to speak about careers for International Relations graduates.

I studied Food Technology.

By my final year, I knew I was not going to continue in Food Technology. I carried out a lot of experiments, but I knew it wasn't the path I wanted. For those of you in your final year wondering what happens after school, your degree is more or less a benchmark. It doesn't completely shape what the outcome will be.

Yet, just days after completing my final examinations, I was on a flight to Accra, Ghana, to participate in the Ghana International Model United Nations.

There I was, coming from Food Technology, entering a space where people were discussing international affairs, negotiating positions and debating the Sustainable Development Goals.

That experience widened my understanding of where I could contribute. It gave me friendships. And it gave me a lesson I still carry into my communication in politics today.

There are many possibilities outside conventional International Relations roles. For instance, if you are passionate about resolving conflicts, there are endless opportunities. I find myself in the middle of conflicts between herders and farmers, and I see how important negotiation and crisis communication are. Those are skills you can transfer anywhere.

Research is another major area. Policy writing requires a lot of research, evaluating everything from food security to leadership. If you are passionate about foreign services but want to do something in Nigeria, there is a gap between trade policies among countries.

At GIMUN, I was in the SOCHUM committee, representing the United States in the simulation.

During one of our sessions, the delegate representing The Gambia approached me about moving a motion. We discussed it, and I agreed. I signed the motion paper, believing we had both signed it.

He then beckoned on me to move the motion.

So I did.

And when I did, he challenged whether we had reached that agreement. The paper before the Chair did not have his signature on it.

I was embarrassed. I had stood up confidently on the strength of an understanding I had not properly verified.

That was an early practical lesson in due diligence.

Before you attach your name to a position, understand exactly what you are endorsing. Before you communicate an agreement, check what has been agreed. Before you act on a document, read the version that is going forward.

Those habits matter in research, partnerships, public administration and political communication. They become especially important when other people will rely on your words.

For you as students, the lesson begins now. Check your sources, clarify your responsibilities and ask questions when something is unclear. You can build relationships while still exercising careful judgement.

My route from Food Technology into these experiences is one reason I encourage you to look widely at your possibilities.

Your discipline gives you a foundation. You can build on it through the skills you develop, the experiences you seek and the problems you learn to understand.

For International Relations and Political Science students, consider the work surrounding a public decision.

Someone has to research the issue. Someone has to examine the options. Someone has to explain the decision. Someone has to organise implementation. And someone has to assess the results.

Each of those functions points towards a possible career.

There is policy research and legislative support. There is international development, where programmes need coordination, partnerships and evaluation. There is public affairs and communication. There is work in civil society, peacebuilding and community engagement. There is analysis that helps organisations understand political developments and their implications.

Some roles require further training or specialist experience. Your first step may be an assistant role with a modest title. Look carefully at what the work will allow you to learn and contribute.

Responsibility and the Cost

Let me bring this closer to home. During the 2019 Ileya festival, the state government included my telephone number as one of two numbers people could call if they had problems disposing of waste. Think about what that means. Your number is out there. People have a problem, and they have been told they can reach you.
I received calls at two in the morning. Three in the morning. Four in the morning.

That experience brought home the responsibility of public-facing work. You have to be measured in your speech. You have to understand that people may contact you at any hour. And you have to recognise what it means to become a point of contact between the public and an institution.

It helped me understand the kind of life I was choosing.

In the course of my career, I have also seen that you can find yourself facing the public precisely where criticism is likely to come. People want answers. Some are frustrated. Your response matters.

That requires preparation: knowing what you can confirm, what you need to check and where a problem should be referred. It also requires systems that support the people answering those calls. Sustainable service needs clear responsibilities and arrangements for handling enquiries.

For a student considering public affairs, governance or development work, this is part of the picture. Alongside the opportunities comes accountability to people whose concerns are real.

What Next?

So how do you prepare? Start with clear writing. Practise explaining a complicated issue in one page. Give the reader the problem, the evidence and the choices.

Develop your judgement. Check information before passing it on. Learn to say, “I need to verify that,” and then do the work.

Learn to organise. Keep track of tasks, time and resources. Follow through on commitments.

And practise listening. The people affected by a decision may understand something your first analysis has missed.

You can practise these skills through a student association, a research assignment or a small community project. Model United Nations gave me exposure and lessons; you can also look for meaningful opportunities within reach on your own campus.

I recognise that access is unequal. Travel costs money. Unpaid placements may be impossible for someone who needs an income. Choose steps that fit your circumstances, and assess opportunities by their responsibilities, supervision, learning and cost.

Here is a practical challenge for the next three months. In the first month, choose one issue you care about and one skill you want to improve. In the second, produce something useful. A short research brief, a simple analysis or a well-documented project. Ask for feedback and revise it. In the third, use that work to approach people and organisations working on the issue. Explain what you can contribute and what you hope to learn.

That gives your interest a form someone else can assess.

I came to these experiences with a degree in Food Technology. In Accra, I learnt to check the agreement before putting my name behind it. During Ileya, I learnt what it means when the public has your number.

Those experiences continue to shape how I think about responsibility.

As you consider your own future, ask yourself what problem you want to help solve. What must you learn to contribute? And are you preparing for the responsibility that comes with the opportunity?

Your next step can begin while you are still here at Bowen. Ultimately, this is a blank canvas. Don't let your specific degree limit what you think you can do. Look within, find what your core strengths are, and know that there is nothing stopping your aspirations.

Thank you.