

# A FULBRIGHT STAY AT MICHIGAN TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY: A LIFE-CHANGING AND CAREER-ALTERING EXPERIENCE

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## ABSTRACT

My first trip to the United States was the result of a Fulbright Scholarship Award to Michigan Technological University in 2005-06. It was a life-transforming experience that boosted my teaching, research, leadership capacities, and social skills. The award gave me the opportunity to meet and work with professionals in my field and enabled me to complete my PhD studies. As a result, my Fulbright experience positioned me for career growth, mentorship, and leadership.

**Keywords:** glass recycling • mentorship • university • community



## INTRODUCTION

In 2005 I received a Fulbright scholarship which at the time was called a Junior Staff Development Program Award (JSD) and is now called a Fulbright Foreign Student Fellowship (FFSP). My Fulbright award gave me the opportunity to go to America for the very first time and I excitedly looked forward to the day of my arrival. I remember sitting on the plane and chatting with the man next to me. When he asked why I was going to the United States, I told him that I had received a Fulbright Award to continue my studies. He physically turned in his chair and replied “*won, what a prestigious scholarship! You must be very good at what you do!*” This further confirmed to me how very prestigious the program is and how very privileged I was for the opportunity.

Upon arrival at Houghton Airport in Michigan, a middle-aged man walked up to me, greeted me, and asked, “*Are you a Fulbrighter?*” I responded “yes” and then wondered how he guessed right. I soon realised that I was wearing my Fulbright shirt which was given to us at the gateway orientation in New York. Then he introduced himself as a Fulbright alumnus and by coincidence he was a faculty member at Michigan Technological University (MTU), my host university. From then on, he and his wife, who was Dean of Students at the same institution, became my guardians. They are Dr. Willie Melton and Dr. Gloria Melton.

At MTU, I studied at the Institute of Materials Processing (IMP) with Professor Jiang Yang Hwang who was the Director of the Institute. I also worked with other Professionals that included Xioadi Huang, Alisson Hein, Shi S as well as some PhD students including Bowen Li and Jia Jia. My research area, which is glass recycling technology drew a lot of attention even in the US at that time.

My trip to the US and the research undertaken formed the fundamental part of my PhD research thesis. The research facilities, books, and journals assisted me in undertaking quality laboratory experiments and quality thesis write-ups. I was awarded a PhD in Glass Technology in March 2007 and became the first to acquire a doctoral degree in glass technology at a Nigerian university.

### **HOST COMMUNITY**

In 2005 when I set out for the Fulbright program, I was not really sure of what to expect from the people I was going to meet and where I was going to live for the nine months. I stayed at the Memorial Union Building (MUB) guest room for a week while I looked for accommodation. Eventually, I found a house off campus in Dodgeville and I shared a room with an American Student at Michigan Tech named Rachel Sommer. Rachel and my neighbours (Tammy, Bonnie, Dell, Mom Helen) were amazing and welcomed me to the neighbourhood on my first day of arrival with gifts. I learnt a lot about the American culture and food and I also shared my Nigerian culture and food with them. For instance, I told Helen Tomasic, the oldest of my neighbours at 83 years of age, that I would not be able to call her by her name as it is in American culture but instead, I could call her 'mom Helen'. I was happy that she accepted and she, in turn always called me 'my daughter Adele' until she passed away over a year ago at 99 years of age.

I also made a lot of friends on campus among faculty members and students. After about 2 weeks I was able to meet other Fulbright fellows from other countries. One event that is still fresh in my memory was the Parade of Nations, where MTU showcased students representing their various countries. We all marched through the town and so many people from the entire city came out and watched us. It was so thrilling to experience this.

### **RESEARCH IN THE US**

My research was laboratory-based at IMP and I began by collecting waste glass from glass stores in the Houghton area and on campus. The faculty members and staff I met were very helpful. I also had access to an excellent library as well as high-technology tools and equipment that facilitated my

research. Being at MTU was also very timely as we had been working on upgrading our program of Glass Technology to Glass and Silicate Technology at my home institution. Working in the IMP laboratories enabled me to acquire skills that were later going to be very useful on my return to Nigeria.

The problem that my research tried to solve was that of recycling glass (light bulbs, bottles, flasks) that are routinely discarded and lies in our streets and in refuse dumps. Most people in my home country of Nigeria were not aware that glass is a recyclable material. My research was designed to find ways of converting glass waste to usable forms and therefore remove it from the environment. My research focussed on the most commonly found glass waste. They are drinking glass (lead crystal glass), fluorescent light tubes (soda-lime-silica glass), laboratory glassware (borosilicate glass), and window glass (soda-lime-silica glass). The outcome of my research has been presented at national and international conferences and published in some academic journals. The implications of the results obtained from this research have also formed the basis for my subsequent research endeavours.

### **RETURN TO NIGERIA AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT**

Upon my return to Nigeria, I felt like I could take on the whole world. I had so many new things I had learned and so many ideas for the application of my skills. But first, I was faced with completing my seminar presentations and taking my oral examination to defend my thesis. I was able to successfully get through this and therefore move up the ladder to becoming a senior lecturer in 2007. Because I was the first to receive a PhD in Glass Technology, my responsibilities of mentoring and guiding younger academics and other full-time postgraduate students on research methodologies were greatly increased. It was also necessary for me to publish my research in reputable journals and to increase my presence at local and international conferences in order to share the outcome of my research with colleagues from around the world.

I also dedicated myself to improving the quality of teaching, research, and overall upgrading of our university program of studies. This led to a rigorous program review and ultimately grew into a full department now called the Department of Glass and Silicate Technology. From the demonstration of all the lessons I had learned during my Fulbright stay at MTU, I was appointed the founding Head of the Department. This appointment gave me the opportunity to influence decisions on what is best for the development of the Department. In its early days, the Department was supported financially by the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TET Fund). This allowed the university to build a new structure for us. My experiences at IMP at MTU were instrumental in the design of the new building.

My continuous hard work and dedication enabled me to rise to the rank of full professor in 2014. Thus, I became the first individual in the department to rise to this rank. I am currently working with some younger academics in collaboration with some Fulbrighters in building more robust Eco-friendly Glass Recycling Technologies with the ultimate vision of establishing a center of excellence.

### IMPACT ON FACULTY AND MENTORSHIP

Becoming a senior academic comes with a lot of responsibilities. I was appointed postgraduate coordinator and faculty seminar coordinator. Here I employed the skills and style of discharging these duties from my Fulbright experience. This helped to improve learning and research conducted by postgraduate students. It also increased their participation at seminars with faculty, improved their engagement in collaborative learning, and allowed them to finish their studies in record time.

I also took on the responsibility of becoming an advisor to several postgraduate students at the MSc and PhD levels, particularly for those who were interested in working on recycling glass. I have worked with my students on many new projects including research on glass paints, glass tiles, glass-concrete, glass-reinforced rub-concrete, and glass-reinforced particle board. I have graduated 11 PhD's and 20 MSc/MA's.

I have also provided mentorship for younger academics on how to employ best practices in handling their lectures and how to write good academic papers for presentation at international conferences and eventual publication in reputable journals.

Over the years I have mentored numerous potential applicants for the Fulbright Scholarship for Undergraduate Students, Foreign Language Teaching Assistantships (FLTA), Fulbright Foreign Student Program, Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program scholarships as well as awards for the Study of the U.S. Institutes for Scholars (SUSIs) program. Eighteen of my mentees have been successful in their applications.

### ENGAGING WITH FULBRIGHT ALUMNI IN NIGERIA

The alumni of the Fulbright program in Nigeria in the year 2000 organized themselves as the Fulbright Alumni Association of Nigeria (FAAN). I joined FAAN in 2006 on my return to Nigeria and since then I have actively participated in its activities. FAAN has accomplished many impactful projects over the years with support from the U.S. Fulbright Mission. FAAN has carried out life-changing community service activities and has inspired, trained, and mentored over 2000 youths through its community outreach efforts.

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Over the years I have been engaged in building the Nigerian Fulbright community. I have been engaged with FAAN activities first as a very active member who rose to coordinating status at the National level. For the past ten years, I have played the role of Assistant Secretary, Secretary, and the 6th President (the first female President). These positions have given me the privilege to lead the community of Fulbrighters of 300 very active members. We organize and carry out some impactful projects on the Nigerian community, contribute to the development of Nigeria and its people as well promote cultural values between the peoples of Nigeria and the United States.

I took over the leadership of FAAN in May 2019 as the President and it spanned over 4 years of 2 terms. During this time, there were many problems in the university system regarding substance abuse and sexual harassment. We embarked on research to establish the extent of the situation and then scheduled a conference where we could further discuss the issues. This was to be held in April 2020 and it was to be hosted by Bowen University, Iwo, Osun State. Just as we reached advanced level preparation for the conference, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out and we had to put the conference on hold. We resorted to virtual activities during the lockdown. This process enabled us to continue our conversations on substance abuse and sexual harassment and solicit experts in the field to speak with us on the major issues. We also held other webinars to create awareness about Covid 19 and provide insight on the coronavirus. Right after the lockdown restrictions were reduced, we held sensitization talks in high schools in the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria and donated face masks and hand sanitizers to them.

In March 2021, we celebrated the Fulbright program's 75th anniversary at Bowen University. This program was held in hybrid mode; both physical and virtual. It was attended by the ambassador to Nigeria Mary Berth Leonard, Cultural Affairs Officer Public Affairs Section, US Embassy Abuja, and several other US mission staff. In attendance was also Prof. Juliu Okojie former Executive Secretary to National Universities Commission and Fulbright alumnus. It was a grand celebration with a great deal of support from the US mission in Nigeria as well as our host and former Fulbrighter Joshua Ogunwole, the Vice Chancellor of Bowen University. We planted trees at the Bowen University premises and gave awards to 75 deserving members of FAAN in recognition of their impact on FAAN and society. One of the main highlights of the conference was the statement of FAAN on substance abuse and sexual harassment in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The United States Consulate in Lagos also commemorated the 75th anniversary of the Fulbright program at the Consul General's residence, I assisted in coordinating the attendance of Fulbrighters from Northern Nigeria.

Because of Nigeria's rising level of national insecurity in 2021, we saw the need to organize a conference in April 2022. We brainstormed to provide some solutions under the theme "Interrogating Equity, Inclusion, and Justice as Panacea to Nigeria's National Security". The conference was hosted by the

University of Uyo. Another important issue that arose was the 8-month strike of university academic staff in pursuance of improved working conditions in public universities. While this was not immediately successful, it did provoke FAAN (95% of its membership are university lecturers) to come together to try to find another way around solving this problem. This culminated in our 2023 conference with the theme ‘Improving the Quality of Higher Education: Stakeholders Engagement’. At this conference, all stakeholders joined in the discussion. FAAN would follow up on the position of this conference to relevant policymakers to ensure its adoption and implementation.

### NETWORKING

The links and networks created during my Fulbright year have not only been maintained but they have also expanded to other professionals that I have met through attending conferences. I have also made and maintained links with US Fulbright Scholars to Nigeria. These networks help us to continue to connect and inspire one another as we pull our energies together to face new challenges which I see as new opportunities.

### NOTES

1. Garkida A. Azi J. and Edagha I (Eds) 2020: *Reflexions Newsletter of Fulbright Alumni Association of Nigeria* Volume 2, March 2020.
2. Garkida A., Azi J., Edagha I., and Agofure (Eds) 2022: *Reflexions Newsletter of Fulbright Alumni Association of Nigeria* Volume 3, April 2022.



Host university international students at Parade of Nations

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**BIOGRAPHY**

Adele Dzikwi Garkida holds a PhD in Industrial Design (Glass Technology) from Ahmadu Bello University in 2007. Adele is the first to acquire a PhD in Glass Technology from a Nigerian University. She was awarded the Fulbright Scholarship to attend the Michigan Technological University from 2005 – 2006. She is a winner of the US Embassy Small Grant Award for youth empowerment. She is a member of several professional organizations. She is involved in teaching at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels and has graduated several undergraduate, MSc, and PhD students. She is the Pioneer Head of the Department of Glass and Silicate Technology, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Adele Garkida is a Professor of Glass Recycling and Sintering Technology and the 6th President of the Fulbright Alumni Association of Nigeria. She can be reached at [adelezik@yahoo.com](mailto:adelezik@yahoo.com)

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