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Transforming Africa Through Higher Education

By NAZANIN LANKARANI

DOHA, QATAR — When Patrick Awuah left his native Ghana in 1985 to study abroad, he had little notion of the opportunities that would await him back home 13 years later.

More than a decade of peace, democracy and prosperity made it possible for a Western-educated professional like Mr. Awuah to leave a successful career in the United States and return home with the single objective of improving African society through education.

In 2002, Mr. Awuah founded Ashesi University College, a private, liberal arts college in Labone, a suburb of Accra, Ghana's capital, with a small class of 30 and big dreams of transforming the continent.

"Africa has reached an inflection point with the march of democracy across the continent," said Mr. Awuah, speaking at the World Innovation Summit for Education in Doha in November, before an audience of education professionals gathered in the Qatari capital to address issues in global education. "We can bring change in one generation. How we train our leaders will make all the difference."

According to Mr. Awuah, the goal of Ashesi, whose name means "beginning" in Akan, the local language of Ghana, is to train a new ethically responsible educated elite to break the cycle of corruption on the continent.

"We want to play a role in the renaissance of Africa," he said.

Despite its natural resources and one of the highest GDPs per capita in Africa, Ghana, a country of about 23 million, suffers from a low 65 percent adult literacy rate, according to a 2009 United Nations Development Program report.

"Only 5 percent of the population has a post-secondary education," Mr. Awuah said.

While in the United States, Mr. Awuah learned certain guiding principles as a student both at Swarthmore, a private college near Philadelphia and at Berkeley's Haas School of

Business, and later as a program manager at Microsoft in Seattle.

In the late 1990s, the birth of a son and a fundraising campaign organized at Microsoft to help victims in Rwanda awakened his sense of social responsibility.

“Becoming a father got me thinking what Africa would mean to my children,” Mr. Awuah said in a follow-up interview by telephone from Accra. “At the time, Africa was a mess. Somalia was in a state of anarchy. Rwanda was in the throes of [genocide](#). I could not stay back in my middle-class Seattle suburb and do nothing.”

In Ghana, Mr. Awuah realized that most college graduates lacked practical training in their own fields, making them unemployable on the job market.

“We were churning out graduates who only knew theory, computer scientists who had never done any programming,” he said. “You cannot be a carpenter if you just read about hammers and nails, and never use a tool.”

So he has made sure Ashesi was equipped with modern computer facilities, with the help of his supporters at Microsoft. The school’s four-year bachelor’s program designed in collaboration with professors from Berkeley, Swarthmore and the [University of Washington](#), offers degrees in business administration, management information systems and computer science.

But Mr. Awuah says it’s just as important to impart a sense of responsibility to his students.

“A typical African student has a stronger sense of entitlement than responsibility,” he said. “To change that is not a matter of resources. Caring about society does not require funding.”

All of Ashesi’s 470 students are required to do community service before graduating.

“It is a life-changing experience,” he said. “They understand that the real privilege of leadership is to help society.”

Annual tuition at Ashesi ranges between \$10 and \$5,000, with most students benefiting from private grants. The school receives no public funding. The Ashesi University Foundation, based in Seattle, enables U.S. and international donors to support the school.

Of 90 total graduates last May, 14 percent went on to graduate school abroad. Still, a majority of Ashesi’s graduates stays in Ghana.

“We have a 99 percent placement within five months of graduation. Many go into banking or the [oil industry](#),” said Ophelia Sam, Ashesi’s director of career services in a telephone interview.

“We see success in that marketability of our students and in the strides we have made in changing cultural perceptions. Last year, a woman was elected head of our student government, a first in Ghana,” said Mr. Awuah.

A new campus under construction in Berekuso, near Accra, is expected to be completed by May and will enable Ashesi to accommodate 600 students.

Of the \$6.5 million raised for the project, \$2.5 million were loans from the [World Bank](#), and the rest donations from private sources.

“There are times when I feel this is mission impossible,” said Mr. Awuah. “But we must believe that these kids are smart, and with the skills to engage the real world, magic can happen.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: January 19, 2011

An earlier version of this article misquoted Patrick Awuah’s comment on the general level of education in Ghana. He said, “Only 5 percent of the population has a post-secondary education,” not “a secondary education.” The article also misstated the percentage of Ashesi graduates last year who went on to graduate school abroad. It is 14 percent, not 40 percent.