

## A vision for leadership

David Treadwell reports from Accra on how a Ghanaian has established a private university that aims to create new leaders in Africa

*"We're responsible for rebuilding Africa, and I'm glad to be part of it."*

Yawa Osebreh

Business Administration major

*"My family tried to convince me not to come, because Ashesi [University] was a new concept. But I insisted, and now they love it!"*

Nii Amon Dsane

Computer Science major

*"In public universities in Ghana, there are up to 2,000 students in a course. Compare that with the kind of education and the facilities you get here. It's worth it."*

Thomas Brien-Mensah

Business Administration major

*"I'm ready to give back. At the end of the day, I can help the people of Ghana."*

Regina Agyare

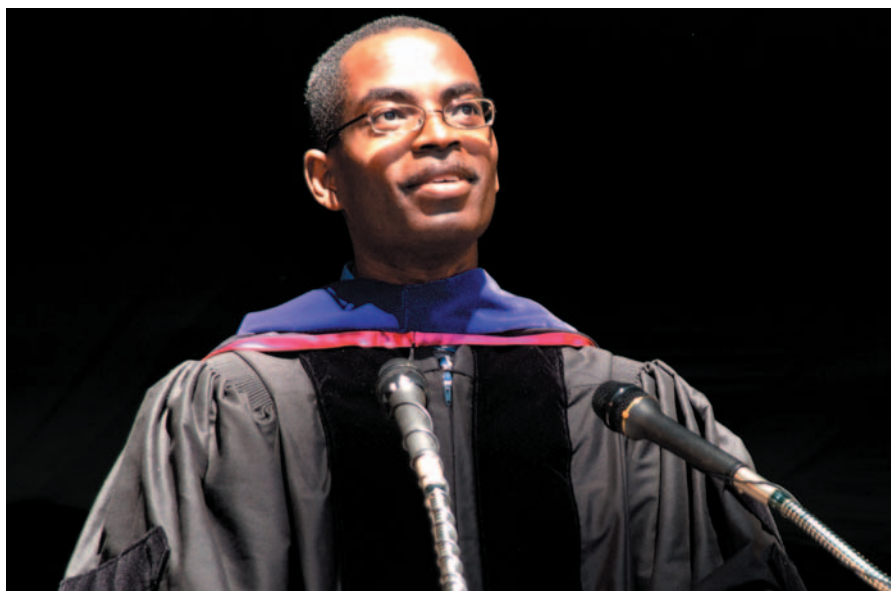
Computer Science major

**P**owerful voices of hope. Future leaders with dreams. Bold pioneers willing to experience a new kind of education in Ghana, on African soil. The students of Ashesi University, an extraordinary new university in Accra that, though just three years old, promises to shape the future of Ghana - and beyond.

To understand Ashesi University, one must know the story of Patrick Awuah, the founder of this bold new educational venture. For Ashesi is Awuah's brainchild, his gift to his native land, his legacy of leadership.

Awuah exemplifies the power of education to transform a life and, if his dream unfolds as planned, to lift a nation. In 1985, he was awarded a full scholarship to attend Swarthmore College, an elite liberal arts college in Pennsylvania in the United States. Swarthmore opened his eyes. "My professors actually wanted to know what I thought. They'd give you hard problems to solve with the faith that you'd figure it out."

From Swarthmore, Awuah went on to software giant Microsoft in Redmond, Washington, where he worked on Windows components that enable computers to network, communicate and share resources. While he carved a successful career at



**Patrick Awuah: founder of the new university**

Microsoft and reaped the riches of the stock option phenomenon, Awuah felt the pull of a higher calling: to go back and help the people of Ghana.

That pull led him to leave Microsoft in 1997 and enrol at the Haas School of Business of the University of California at Berkeley. In a course on international development, he assembled a team to study the creation of a new university in Ghana. To determine the feasibility of the idea, the team spent three weeks in Ghana conducting surveys and focus groups with students, parents and school principals. Satisfied that the demand existed for a new private university with an outside-the-box, small-classes, high-tech savvy, liberal arts-based educational philosophy, Awuah stayed on an additional five weeks to meet with academics, business leaders and others to assess the "cost" side.

Convinced that the concept had merit on the basis of the research, he returned to Berkeley and built an advisory council to lay the groundwork. "I was in the mode of 'Okay, this project is going to go.'" He recruited Nina Marini, a fellow MBA student, to partner in his venture. In 1999, Nina and Patrick established a non-profit foundation in Seattle to serve as a temporary headquarters for a new university to be set up half way across the world.

The two educational entrepreneurs had much work to do and they did it. Selecting

a name, Ashesi, which means "beginning" in the Twi language of Ghana. Soliciting funds from private donors to provide a financial foundation for the project. Acquiring accreditation as a private university offering undergraduate degrees in computer science and business administration with a liberal arts foundation. Hiring the best and brightest faculty, a task eased by the decision to pay professors twice the going rate in Ghana. Developing a liberal arts programme (with the help of Swarthmore); a computer-science programme (with the help of the University of Washington); and a business-management programme (with the help of Berkeley's Haas School). And, finally and perhaps most important, recruiting students to attend a brand new university, a mere dream that was both unproven and, by Ghanaian standards, relatively expensive.

The challenges seemed daunting, but failure was never an option. Richard McAniff, Awuah's former manager at Microsoft, knows well the unwavering determination of Ashesi's founder. "I was talking to Patrick about Ashesi one time and asked: 'What's Plan B?'" and Patrick replied, "There is no Plan B; we're going to make this work." It's that same drive he had when he first came to Microsoft.

Ghana has long suffered from the "brain drain" problem. All too often and for too many years, the nation's best students - such as Awuah - opt to go to college in America

or Europe. And, all too often, they never return.

With the extraordinary exception of Ashesi University, the higher education options in Ghana today are less than promising. The public universities, such as the University of Ghana, are woefully underfunded and over-crowded. And, again with the lone exception of Ashesi, the handful of private universities, most of them new, are all church-sponsored.

Moreover, higher education in Ghana suffers, according to Awuah and other educational experts, from a problem that extends beyond limited funding and poor morale. At other universities, the educational approach follows the old British model: top-down and rather authoritarian. In effect, professors stand up in front of the class, dispensing pearls of wisdom. Students take notes and regurgitate what they've written. Patrick Awuah and Ashesi University subscribe to a different philosophy: students must be engaged, must be encouraged to

think outside the box, to speak out, to take risks, to lead.

Happily, a vanguard of foreign-educated leaders are slowly returning to Ghana with visions of shaping and lifting their home land in all areas, from business and finance to health and education. Awuah himself was selected in 2002 as an inaugural fellow of the Africa Leadership Initiative, a programme to nurture young leaders who are motivated, effective, values-based and community spirited.

In March 2002, Ashesi University officially opened its doors on a small but attractive site in a residential section of Accra. The first 30 students arrived with great expectations and no small pride. The faculty and staff sensed and conveyed the energy and excitement of Awuah's vision.

A satellite dish on campus ensured that students could be connected to the world outside via the internet. An ample supply of new computers provided easy access for every student at all times - a blessing in a

nation where students in some computer science classes at other universities never even get to use a computer. An on-campus generator ensured that classes - and computers - could go on, even if the electricity was off, a not infrequent event in Accra. And the professors quickly set the tone, which conveyed a powerful collective message: You are important. Your opinions matter. You are destined to lead. We will help you reach your dreams. Right here. In Africa.

Currently in its third year of operation, Ashesi enrolls 110 students. Twenty full-time faculty and staff work at Ashesi in Ghana and an additional three work at the foundation office in Seattle. More than 40 education experts and business leaders serve on advisory boards. And the word is spreading around Ghana, indeed to other African nations, that Ashesi represents a truly unique educational experience, a diamond in the rough.

Several key factors define and differentiate Ashesi University, setting it apart from other higher education opportunities in Ghana and other parts of Africa: small classes; ample computer access; a focus on student engagement in the classroom; a liberal arts-based curriculum; a clean and attractive campus; the opportunity to get "real-world" experience by going through practical internship experiences; and professors who deeply believe in the power of Ashesi to change lives and in the promise of their students to become leaders.

The students quoted at the beginning of this piece begin to capture the spirit and substance of Ashesi University. As Nina Marini, Ashesi's co-founder and the head of Ashesi's foundation in Seattle, notes: "There's a sense of energy among these students. They're going to make their mark."

The faculty and staff, though small in number, share the students' enthusiasm. "We subscribe to the right values, the values that parents are seeking. Being part of changing lives is an amazing experience. I'm here for the long haul," notes Mildred Wulff, Director of Business Operations. "Ashesi excels in leadership, in training responsible citizens. We ask students: 'What are you doing? Is it meaningful to you? To the nation?' This place is like a dream, exactly what I want to do when I wake up in the morning," explains Fafa Zormelo, Associate Director of Admissions.

**Ashesi president Patrick Awuah and vice president Nina Marini at the entrance of the university campus in Accra**





### A class busy with computers at Ashesi

"If you want a future for your child, then intersect them with people who know their stuff. Ashesi offers real value for the dollars," says John Antwi-Nuamah, Computer Science Professor. "Ashesi teaches critical thinking; students learn to challenge ideas and develop their own ideas. Parents notice the change in their children very quickly," according to Mark Poynter, Social Science Lecturer. "We're throwing a challenge to public universities. They should buck up and ask themselves, 'What are we not doing right?'" encourages Perpetua Dadzie, Librarian. "I've always cared about quality, and Patrick shares that vision," says Sitsofe Auku, Professor of Mathematics.

Nana Apt, Academic Dean at Ashesi, former head of the Sociology Department at the University of Ghana, chuckles when she recalls her first encounter with Awuah. "When Patrick walked into my office and said he wanted to start a new university, I almost laughed. Then I became fascinated with his vision. Something just clicked."

Dr Apt's appreciation of Ashesi stems from her own educational philosophy. "I've always been a rebel, always experimented with students. Teachers aren't the key to knowledge; they're the catalyst. They get students to want to learn, to search for answers. I've always thought that there should be a place in Ghana that teaches young people the right way. This is that place. To sceptical parents, I say, 'Visit the campus; spend a day; see how we teach!'"

Those familiar with Ashesi University, in Ghana and beyond, heap kudos on this new venture. To know Ashesi is to extol its success. In the summer of 2003, examiners from the Haas School of Business and Swarthmore reviewed Ashesi's coursework

and gave it high marks.

After the National Accreditation Board of Ghana visited in October 2003, the board's deputy executive hailed Ashesi as one of Ghana's best new universities and an example to follow.

Paul Effa, Executive Secretary of the National Council on Tertiary Education in Ghana, says: "People see private universities as leaders in technology, more creative in the way they do things. Ashesi is clearly on the forefront. With the emergence of the private sector, more students will stay in Ghana to go to college."

The path of Patrick Awuah, in big picture terms, parallels that of Ken Ofori-Atta, Chairman of Databank, a leading financial firm in Accra that he founded in the early 1990s. Like Patrick, Ken had been educated at top institutions in the US (Columbia and Yale). Like Awuah, Ofori-Atta had experienced great financial success (on Wall Street); and like Awuah, he wanted to bring his education and experience to Ghana, to uplift his native land.

It is no surprise, then, that Ken Ofori-Atta expresses unbridled enthusiasm and optimism for Ashesi University. "Patrick has a daring vision; he'll get it done," says Ofori-Atta, an entrepreneur who knows the power of passion to see a job through. "It's unbelievable to see Ashesi happen, almost like witnessing a childbirth!"

A proven business executive, Ofori-Atta views the cost of education as an investment, not just an outlay. And he's backed up that belief by establishing a scholarship fund at Ashesi. "These education dollars are better invested than spending ten times as much in the United States."

And what about Ashesi's future? Where will the dream lead? Good questions, these, but only time will reveal the precise answers. Ashesi is no paint-by-the-numbers enterprise, no cookie cutter bureaucracy.

Here, though, are some strong possibilities:

Within a period between three and 10 years, Ashesi will move to a magnificent 100-acre hilltop site at Berekuso, a village about 15 miles from Accra. The Chief of Berekuso who sold Patrick this tract of land says: "Patrick has a patriotic instinct. He is my adopted son." The Chief also views Ashesi, in a way, as an adopted university of his village, and assures Patrick that "the elders will give every assistance to help the dream come true."

The student enrolment will expand from 110 to about 1,600. The recently announced study abroad programme will be expanded to accommodate students from colleges and universities from the United States and around the world.

Increasing numbers of businesses and organisations in Ghana and throughout Africa will give Ashesi students real-world experience opportunities through internships.

Ashesi will become a magnet for the best and brightest students from Ghana and other parts of Africa.

And the brain drain, a major impetus to Ashesi's founding, will ease as students discover superb educational options right in Ghana - not just at Ashesi but at other institutions that have taken their lead from Ashesi's stellar example.

In June 2004, Patrick Awuah received an honorary degree from Swarthmore College - an extraordinary honour for anyone, let alone someone just 39 years old. In addition to thanking Swarthmore, Awuah passed on some wise words to the graduates and their parents: "...in the words of King Solomon, a good man leaves an inheritance for his children's children. We would be in a different place if all our leaders committed themselves to leaving a lasting inheritance of freedom, prosperity and peace for future generations. Sadly, far too often history's leaders have lacked the wisdom of King Solomon."

Happily, Patrick Awuah is leaving, through the founding of Ashesi University, an extraordinary inheritance for his children and his children's children; for Ghana and her future leaders; for people everywhere who believe in the power of dreams to transform lives. ■