Organization Profile

Ashesi University Foundation: Ashesi University is Shaping Africa's Future Leaders

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By Joanne Lu

Students walk across the Ashesi University campus. Photo provided by Ashesi University Foundation.

 "Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now."

These words from German philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe are engraved on the glass doors of the entrance to Ashesi University in Accra, Ghana. When the university's founder, Patrick Awuah, quit Microsoft to pursue his vision of educating Africa's future ethical and entrepreneurial leaders, Goethe's exhortation offered him the reassurance he needed. It also inspired the name of his school: *Ashesi* means "beginning" in Asante.

For Awuah, the beginning of Ashesi's story goes back to his own college education at Swarthmore. Even as an engineering student, he was studying subjects like political science, history, and economics, and gaining an understanding of the context in which innovation and industrialization happens. The liberal arts approach was different from any educational model he'd seen at home in Ghana.

The longer Awuah spent in the States, the more determined he was to stay. He enjoyed living here, loved his work, and was frustrated with Ghana's lackluster development. But things shifted with the birth of his first child. Suddenly, Awuah realized that the future of Africa was important for his children and his grandchildren, and to honor their ancestry and legacy, he had to be a part of helping Ghana thrive.

Awuah's initial instinct was to start a software company – after all, he worked for Microsoft. But the more he researched and talked with others, the more he realized that a lack of visionary leadership is what continued to hold back Ghana from thriving.

That's when Awuah turned his focus to starting a university. Although less than 10 percent of Ghanaian youth at the time were attending university, Awuah knew that the leadership of the future would likely come from that small base. Therefore, he wanted to give them the tools they needed to lead differently – to lead ethically and effectively.

"If we can help our students discover who they are and understand where they stand in society and the responsibility that they have to their society, we will have achieved a great deal," says Awuah.

Patrick Awuah, founder of Ashesi University. Photo provided by Ashesi University Foundation.

Awuah launched Ashesi University in 2002 with 30 students. Today, there are 1,013 students from more than 20 countries, and by 2020, they expect to have 1,200 students. Currently, 17 percent of the student body is international students, and eventually, Ashesi aims to make that 30 percent. But no more than 10 percent will ever be from outside Africa, because the goal is to invest in African students as the continent's future leaders.

Currently, Ashesi offers four majors that were designed in response to what's needed in the workforce: management information systems, computer science, business, and engineering. But, like Awuah's own Swarthmore education, these technical majors are based on a liberal arts curriculum that equips students to navigate the context in which they will innovate and solve problems. It's not just about offering a well-rounded curriculum. Ashesi's curriculum is designed to complement technical skills with a holistic understanding of African history, society and the world at large in order to instill in students critical and entrepreneurial thinking.

By entrepreneurial thinking, Ashesi doesn't just mean starting and running businesses (although, it does encourage students to do that, too). Ashesi defines entrepreneurial thinking as identifying and solving problems – something that's not commonly taught in African schools, where students are often trained to spit back one particular answer and adhere to one way of doing things. Perhaps that's why leaders on the continent have for so long been able to perpetuate power imbalances and poverty, despite local and international investments, natural resources and economic resources, says Megan MacDonald, Director of Strategic Partnerships at Ashesi University Foundation.

MacDonald also notes that in a context of poverty, human instinct is to take for oneself when one gains access to resources. But especially with Africa's booming population growth and the added challenges of post-colonialism, the continent needs leaders who are looking at the bigger picture and who are capable of making choices for the wellbeing of everyone.

Students in class at Ashesi University. Photo provided by Ashesi University Foundation.

It is not enough just to tell students they should adhere to a certain set of values. They need to have the tools to put those values into practice. That's why Ashesi's approach gives students the tools and the practice they need to make different choices, to show by example that it is possible to lead ethically and dismantle systems of corruption.

And they're doing just that. Hannan Yaro Boforo from the class of 2010 developed an AI-powered biometric coding system (thumbprint technology) that was used in Ghana's 2012 presidential elections to help increase voter turnout and fight voter fraud. Now, he and his team are helping to implement similar technology in other African countries and other sectors, including healthcare and social intervention programs.

Kpetermeni Siakor from the class of 2015 was still a student at Ashesi when the Ebola outbreak devastated his home country of Liberia. From Ashesi's campus in Ghana, he reached out to a non-profit in Liberia and ended up partnering with the government to create deployment tools for health workers all over the country,

tracking their movements and the distribution of support. So, even while he was a student, he found a way to impact an entire country's response to one of the deadliest outbreaks in history.

That's why MacDonald says Ashesi has become a symbol of possibility for Africa, and why Ghanaians at home and abroad have called Ashesi "the pride of Ghana." Beyond expanding their own scope in the future – with graduate degrees and more research capacities being considered – Ashesi hopes to continue to inspire new and existing institutions. Already, MacDonald says that some local universities in Ghana have begun to adopt a more liberal arts approach, while a new university in francophone Niger – Africa Development University – cites Ashesi as a founding model. Ashesi also runs an "Education Collaborative," which brings together universities from across the continent – last year, it was 24 – to share best practices, troubleshoot and create an active network of institutions, committed to elevating higher education in Africa.

"In international development, there are so many external solutions to local problems," says MacDonald. "But the whole ethos of Ashesi is that in order to solve Africa's problems, we need to equip African leaders. I think that is really powerful, and the best thing that those of us from the international development community can do is to invest and support that leadership."