

LEADERSHIP CASE

# ASHESI UNIVERSITY

Just 5% of college-aged Ghanaians go to college. Anyone in college today will eventually be running Ghana's courts, schools or hospitals, designing its roads and infrastructure, and setting financial or environmental policy.

What will this 5% stand for?" Patrick Awuah demands. "Will they play a positive role in creating a more ethical, just and productive future for Africa? Will they have concern for the greater good, regardless of

ethnicity, gender or class? Will they have an entrepreneurial mindset? Or will the world watch as Africa's next generation of leaders remains a closed cohort, plagued by corruption and inefficiency?"

These are urgent questions for a continent in which, despite its beauty and rich natural resources, 19 out of the world's poorest 23 countries are located, according to the IMF. Six out of the world's 10 most corrupt countries are African, according to Transparency International. War and factionalism, economic collapse and lack of opportunity fuel a frightening brain drain: the International Organization for Migration estimates there are 300,000 African professionals living outside Africa, with a further 20,000 emigrating every year.

Patrick Awuah was one of those. Escaping life under military dictatorship, he left Ghana after high school and went to college in the US. He settled in Seattle, built a successful career as a Microsoft executive, married an American, and started a family. Patrick had put Ghana behind him. He recounts how, visiting his home country for the first time in over five years, "I was extremely disillusioned. Nothing worked. I came back to the US and told my colleagues at Microsoft, I would never return to Africa to live."

**“ I REALIZED I WAS STALLING BECAUSE OF FEAR OF FAILURE. BUT IF I DIDN'T TRY, I WOULD HAVE FAILED ANYWAY SO—WHY NOT TRY? ”**

A few years later, however, with the eruption of the crises in Rwanda and Sudan, Patrick's certainty was shaken. One of the Vice Presidents at Microsoft organized a drive to do something for Rwanda. "I remember feeling extremely guilty because here was an American, not an African, who was doing something about a crisis that I had not even thought to do."

Around the same time, Patrick's first child was born, triggering latent restlessness. "When I looked for the first time into my son's eyes, I realized I had been extremely arrogant to think that I had within me the power to disown a continent. Africa will matter to my children, to the way they see themselves, the way the world sees them." He began to think about going back to Ghana.

## ABOUT PATRICK

Had a successful career in Seattle as a software engineer and program manager with Microsoft. Earned an MBA from UC Berkeley.

**Named MacArthur 'Genius' Fellow in 2015.**

Moved to the US to attend Swarthmore College on a full scholarship. Earned a BSc in Engineering and a BA in Economics.

Grew up under a military dictatorship in Ghana.

Returned to Ghana to found and lead Ashesi University, which opened its doors in 2002.

An **Africa Leadership Initiative Fellow of the Aspen Global Leadership Network**, and **Winner of the John P. McNulty Prize** in 2009.

But what could his contribution be?

Given his professional background, Patrick originally thought something in IT could potentially be catalytic, and allow him to make a real contribution. The more he looked at the society, however, the less convinced he was. "I realized from many conversations with friends and family that the central problem in Ghana was one of leadership. Many aspects of society were not functioning well—neighborhoods were without water, there was high unemployment, slums were growing, hospitals were dysfunctional—and if you really drilled down to what lay behind this, it was a lack of leadership, and in some cases plain corruption. Underlying every challenge were people in positions of responsibility who were neither fixing problems nor creating solutions."

There was, Patrick believed, a causal relationship between Ghana's traditional approach to education, and poor leadership at all levels in the country. He saw a stark contrast between his US college experience, which stressed critical thinking and problem solving, and the rote learning common throughout Ghana's educational system, where students learn a narrow subject matter and are tested on recall.

Still, it took some time before he felt ready to act. "It's hard to leave a good job and go off and do something this risky," he says.

Partly, the tipping point came through the Aspen Fellowship; specifically a conversation around an Ursula K. Le Guin reading entitled *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*. Patrick's dream of making a difference in Ghana meant leaving a comfortable and wonderful life—the metaphorical Omelas—for the unknown. He realized, Patrick says, that he needed to commit: "Even though we don't know what the end of the story could be, we need to be writing the story."

"I was stalling because of fear of failure. But if I didn't try, I would have failed anyway so—why not try?"

Patrick enrolled in an MBA program at UC Berkeley to help advance the skills he needed to launch Ashesi. Demonstrating his appreciation for the power of networks, Patrick put Ashesi forward as a research project, thus leveraging the brain trust in his class. This also resulted in a long-term collaboration, with one of his peers becoming his business partner.

Importantly, his sojourn at Berkeley also helped him create a framework for building a liberal arts university in an environment without a history of such institutions. Along with Patrick's alma mater Swarthmore, UC Berkeley supported the project by co-designing a curriculum that combined elements of a traditional liberal arts college with technical majors.

On the ground, over in Ghana, there were multiple challenges. It took a year to convince the local Accreditation Board that a radically different curriculum was valid. On a personal front, the Awuah family was confronted with a real quandary: their son, whose birth had in part precipitated the journey, was diagnosed with autism and it was questionable whether they would find the right support for him in Ghana.

## ABOUT ASHESI UNIVERSITY

- After a humble start in a rented house, Ashesi is now located on a **100-acre campus in Berekuso**, about an hour's drive from Ghana's capital city, Accra.
- It is a non-profit private institution, and **55% of students receive financial aid**.
- It is a four-year university, combining majors in engineering, computer science, information sciences and business with a liberal arts education. Every Ashesi graduate is required to take courses in **ethics, African studies** and complete a **community service project**.
- Ashesi is becoming a truly pan-African university. **Students hail from 21 African nations**, and 20% come from African countries outside of Ghana.
- In little over a decade, Ashesi has established itself as a premier university. There is a **1 in 5 acceptance rate**, and its 892 graduates have a 100% job placement rate. **Over 90% opt to stay in the region** and apply their skills in Africa.

But by far the most intractable challenge was finding financial support.

"My wife and I started the ball rolling with \$300,000, and Microsoft colleagues supported us in raising the necessary seed capital relatively quickly. Initially, we were OK," says Patrick.

As a private institution, however, Ashesi receives no government subsidy, and Patrick was committed to a financial aid system for the university in order to ensure diversity. "The most important conversation on campus is a conversation about the 'good society,' something I took from our Aspen fellowship seminars," says Patrick. "What is the good society we would like to see in Africa? That conversation is more interesting if you have diversity in the classroom, because each person has a perspective to share, but each person also has certain blinders that need to be peeled away."

In a typical year, about 50% of the students pay fees, 25% are subsidized and 25% pay no fees at all. And each year, as enrollments and costs doubled, the pressure mounted.

By 2004, the financial situation was so parlous that Patrick and his team faced a painful reality: they had no option but to close Ashesi.

It was a sad time. The team turned their minds to developing a business plan that would close Ashesi with grace, transferring students to other universities at Ashesi's cost, and laying off staff.

Particularly painful was the fact that the team was simultaneously receiving glowing feedback: “We were hearing from companies that had hired our students as interns how remarkably different they were,” said Patrick. “It was evident that what we had set out to build was working. But we simply could not see a way to keep the university afloat.”

Part of the close-down planning involved visiting other universities to which Ashesi might transfer students. Patrick sat in those classes, sometimes so large that he couldn’t see the professor or the board, or unable to hear because the sound system wasn’t working.

At Ashesi, class sizes are 10-40 students; at the state University of Ghana, some classes were 1,500-strong. “I saw what failure really looked like, and I realized that these were not universities we could in good conscience transfer our students to. They were not being educated in the way that they needed. We could not let Ashesi stop.”

“HOW DO WE TEACH THE FUTURE LEADERS OF A COUNTRY TO BE DEEPLY ETHICAL? TO BE ABLE TO THINK CRITICALLY? TO BE CREATIVE AND INNOVATIVE, AND TO BE PROBLEM-SOLVERS?”

It was a watershed moment. Patrick approached one of Ashesi’s supporters from his time as an Aspen Fellow, who responded with enough support “to keep the lights on for a couple of months.” He communicated to the Board that he would not be spending any more time thinking about a shutdown, and asked the Board to rally around fundraising: “I also met with the team, and told them we had to work together to cut costs, and to boost enrollment. They agreed to a salaries freeze.”

In time, seven donor families came forward, underwriting the deficit for a further four years, and Ashesi was able to keep going. Ultimately, it took seven years from launch in 2002 to break even—both a remarkably short time, and a major act of endurance.

Now financially more robust, with its new campus established and its reputation growing, Ashesi is in a good place. But there is still, Patrick says, much work to do.

“We know that fostering innovation in Africa is also about educating people for the public sector—people who, in setting policy, will create an environment which will allow innovation to flourish. We’re designing an academic program for that.

“Also, coming back to where we started, this project of transforming Africa is going to be done not by one institution, but by a thousand. We need to build a network of like-minded institutions. Ashesi is a self-contained system, and in order to transform African leadership, we need entire systems working together—I am fired up about how we can play a role in that.”

For Patrick, the success of Ashesi graduates is an indication of what

is to come. “Our alumni stories lift me up: I feel like they’re a living endowment for the institution.

“We have an alumnus who heads the Treasury Department of a private bank in Sierra Leone. One is heading a peace-keeping squad in Liberia. We have alumni in prominent jobs in financial services, running orphanages and taking up other incredible positions. I didn’t think it would happen this quickly. These are people in their 20s, standing up, and doing what they have to do. My heart is filled by this.

“Wherever they go, they stand out. I have met professors in the US who have discovered they have these Ghanaian students earning their Masters who are top of their class. And they ask where they did their undergrad, expecting it would be a US university, and they find out they went to Ashesi. I like that we have changed the narrative of our continent in this way.”

Africa has a long way to go. But Ashesi’s contribution is a generation of graduates who enter the working world equipped in equal parts with an ethical compass and problem-solving skills. “There is a nation to be built,” says Patrick. “And young people are the ones who are going to do it. The market is getting bigger, the problems are getting bigger, infrastructure must grow... there’s a ton of work to do. There is an incredible opportunity for us to meet that challenge. If we engage that challenge with integrity, if we work hard with courage, dedication and commitment, this country will flourish, and we will advance the cause of Africa.”



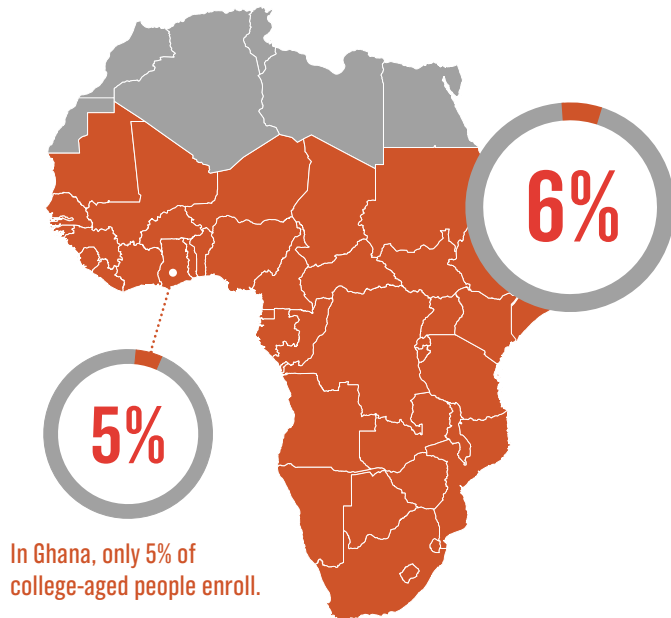


# THE CONTEXT

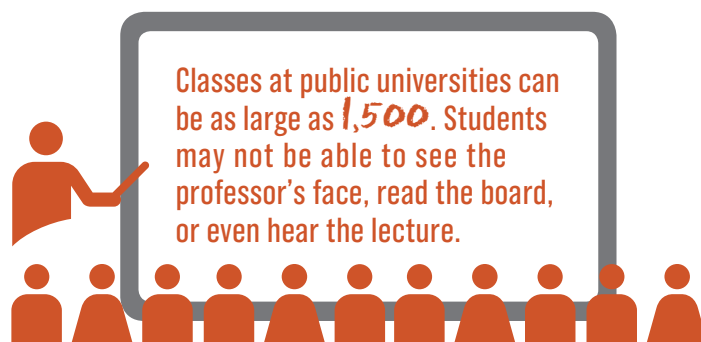
There is a need for ethical leadership in Africa, where 6 of the 10 most corrupt countries are located.



Only 6% of young people in sub-Saharan Africa are enrolled in higher education institutions, compared to the global average of 26%.

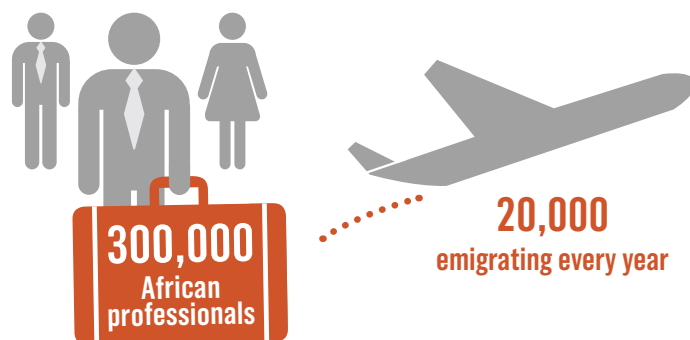


The higher education system in Ghana is **overburdened** and unable to meet demand, with students often lining up hours before class to secure a seat.



## The Brain Drain

300,000 African professionals live outside of the continent, with a further 20,000 emigrating every year.



# IN HIS OWN WORDS: WHAT PATRICK HAS LEARNED

### If you earn people's trust, your networks will come through for you.

"My professors from Swarthmore and Berkeley trusted me; those who joined my advisory board had seen me work on the Ashesi project since my arrival at Berkeley. My Microsoft colleagues knew I was committed to making it work."

### Support at home is essential.

"My wife had not been to Africa before she met me. Yet when I mentioned this idea, her willingness was a key moment in the

development of the plan. My McNulty and Aspen peers continue to remind me that a solid home base is foundational to the success of any venture."

### Forge ahead even if circumstances aren't ideal.

"I often think I should have raised enough capital for the first three or four years before embarking on the venture. But with no track record in education, and with an untested model, is this even realistic? Sometimes, you just have to jump."