

Education: New college sets high standards to mould Africa's future leaders

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Some say that the most powerful way to change the world is to educate its future leaders. This is certainly the view of Patrick Awuah, founder and president of Ghana's Ashesi University.

While working as a software engineer for Microsoft in Seattle, Mr Awuah had been looking for a way to contribute to nation-building efforts both in his home country, Ghana, and more broadly across Africa.

"Drilling down, I came to leadership," he says. "And if you look at who is at the African universities, those are the people who are going to be running this continent," says Mr Awuah, who was educated in the US at Swarthmore College.

Yet when he surveyed the higher education landscape across Africa, Mr Awuah was dismayed by what he saw. For a start, he says, only 5 per cent of school leavers were going on to college.

Because the number of young people embarking on higher education is so small, he says, these are by definition the future leaders – and not just politicians but also the lawyers, doctors, bankers, chief executives and teachers essential to shaping society and managing an economy.

Yet most young people, he says, are receiving their education from institutions where classes are overcrowded, where learning by rote is the main form of instruction and cheating is the norm.

To start to change this, Mr Awuah decided to create a liberal arts college that would educate students to be ethical and entrepreneurial leaders.

First, though, he decided to educate himself – with business and management skills. He embarked on a two-year MBA programme at the University of California's Haas School of Business, a course he says was probably "the single most important investment" he made in the Ashesi University project.

After a 1998 trip to Ghana with business school colleagues to conduct a feasibility study into the possibility of setting up a university in Accra, the capital, he returned to Seattle and set up a foundation, investing his own money as well as donations from colleagues and from Microsoft.

He decided against a for-profit model. "It soon became clear that if we wanted to achieve a certain quality, we wouldn't have sufficient returns to attract investors and venture capitalists," he explains.

"And it wasn't clear what the exit scenarios were – you don't start a school and sell it to an investor or do an IPO. So for an adventure like this, the non-profit model seemed better."

But while half the students are on financial aid and fundraising remains essential for expansion, the school is financially self-sustaining, with tuition fees largely covering operating costs.

As well as pushing for high academic standards, fostering a culture of ethics is a central mission of the school. If caught cheating, students fail the course. Anyone found cheating a second time is expelled. "When we started, people said we were being unreasonable," says Mr Awuah. "But it's what schools in the west do, so why shouldn't we?"

Now, students sign up to an honour code – one voted into force by the students themselves in 2008 – that requires them to report instances of academic misconduct. Moreover, all students embark on community service before they graduate.

With a liberal arts core and majors in business administration, computer science and management information systems, the emphasis is on teaching young people to think entrepreneurially and ethically, as well as on equipping them to analyse problems and come up with solutions.

"It's a very different learning environment," says Mr Awuah. "They do lots of writing, teamwork and talking, rather than just learning by rote and following teachers' notes."

After starting its first year with 30 students, Ashesi University's enrolment has now reached more than 400. With the

help of a \$2.5m investment from the International Finance Corporation, the investment arm of the World Bank, a new campus will open next year, accommodating many more students.

Most importantly, perhaps, more than 95 per cent of graduates from the school have remained in Africa, generating a fresh supply of the young, entrepreneurial, ethical individuals that African political, social and business institutions so badly need.

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