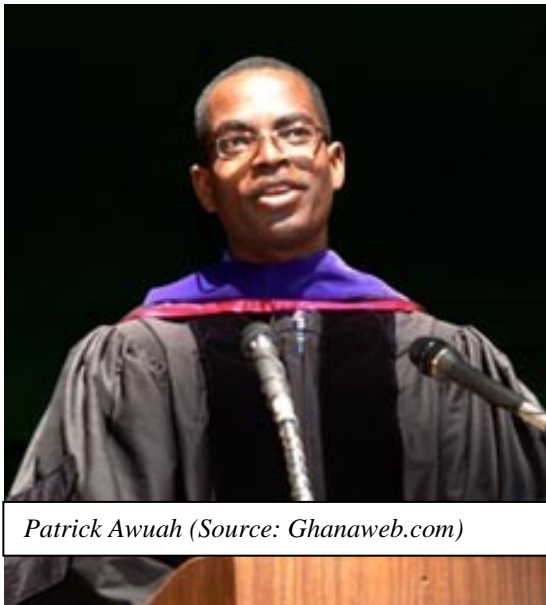

PATRICK AWUAH: LEADERSHIP THROUGH EDUCATION

Interview conducted by Kobina Aidoo^a

Ashesi University is a private university, based in Ghana that differentiates itself from other universities in the country with its emphasis on professional development as well as leadership and how to be better citizens. Four years after it was founded, 100 percent of its first class of graduates are employed (90 percent within the first three months of graduation) and 80 percent of the second class had job offers before graduation. Students work and intern with top companies in Ghana and abroad, including major international finance organizations. The founder, Patrick Awuah, quit his job at Microsoft Corporation in Seattle to contribute to the development of his native country by helping to educate its next generation of leaders.



Patrick Awuah (Source: Ghanaweb.com)

Africa Policy Journal: What is Ashesi University?

Patrick Awuah: The idea for Ashesi is to train a new generation of ethical and entrepreneurial leaders for Africa and by that we mean leaders who are very competent in their professional field, whatever it is, and who have a very deep commitment to integrity and a very good sense of their responsibility to society.

APJ: Was there a specific moment that sparked this idea?

PA: Yes, the event that caused me to think about coming back to Africa, and Ghana specifically to get involved was when I became a parent. At the time, I was working at Microsoft Corporation but becoming a parent caused me to think about what the world, and what Africa meant for my child who is African. And it seemed to me that economic prosperity as well as cultural prosperity in Africa is very important.

^a Kobina Aidoo is Co-Chief Editor of the Africa Policy Journal. This interview was conducted on January 9, 2007 at Ashesi University.

APJ: Who was the first person with whom you shared the idea, and what was his or her reaction?

PA: One morning I asked my wife what she would say if I said I was going to quit Microsoft and come back to Ghana and get involved in education and she said immediately, “let’s do it.” Leading up to that moment, there had been a lot of soul-searching and thinking and talking to friends and family here in Ghana to try to settle on what to do exactly.

APJ: How much of your own education was in Ghana?

PA: I completed secondary school in Ghana and then went to college in the United States.

APJ: Knowing what you know now, what would you say was missing in your education that would have made you a more competent professional and better citizen?

PA: The one thing that is missing in the Ghanaian educational system at all levels is critical thinking, attention to communication skills, and attention to analytical reasoning. I got some of that because I did a lot of mathematics but for the most part we were just memorizing information and regurgitating it for exams. I certainly noticed when I went to college that I needed to do a lot more work just to catch up.

APJ: So what was your vision for Ashesi?

PA: The vision was that we take students who are just making a transition into adulthood and take them through a system that helps them become values-based leaders. And we’re on the right path.

APJ: What accomplishments make Ashesi different from other educational institutions in Ghana in particular and Africa as a whole?

PA: I believe that the proof of the pudding is in the eating. We are training people for society. When they come out of an Ashesi education, how do they do outside? Using that measure we are doing much better than any other institution in Ghana. Our first class of graduates has 100 percent

employment. 90 percent of that was within three months of graduation. For our second class, 80 percent of them had jobs before graduation, most of them, multiple offers. More important than getting those jobs are the reports that we are getting from their employers, which is overwhelmingly positive. We set out to train them a certain way, to be unafraid of ambiguity, to be able to think critically and analytically, and we train them to have a strong work ethic. The feedback we are getting is that whatever we have done has worked. We are very proud of that.

APJ: Beyond the pedagogical philosophy, what is it in your management that helps you accomplish those goals?

PA: I am not completely familiar with how management is done in other institutions but here, certainly, the executive is very engaged and very committed. We pay particular attention to our financial health. For us performance counts a lot. At the end of every class, we have a course review where students write feedback about the instructor, the teaching assistant and the content of the course. In the administration, we have regular performance reviews. We really care about the bottom line, which is “are we accomplishing our mission?” So we measure as we go, and that’s a very important aspect of how we manage this institution.

APJ: Which aspects of this enterprise have exceeded your expectations and which aspects haven’t done so yet?

PA: What has most pleasantly surprised me is how quickly our students have embraced our mission and how quickly some of them have risen to the occasion. However, we still have work to do. Where I have been disappointed is in my interactions with the public sector. I knew before that there was a lot of bureaucracy but there have been moments when I’ve asked myself how we have gotten to be where so many leaders are careless about the future of our Continent. And you get that sense too much working here, especially with some of the people in very senior positions.

APJ: On that point, what has been the overall reaction of the government and, especially, the established state tertiary education institutions to this startup?

PA: The reaction has ranged. There have been people who have been extremely supportive, there have been people who have been somewhat ambivalent, and there have been people who have considered private education as a threat to what they do. The government has been positive. Certainly says all the right things and there are people in government trying to do the right thing but to be perfectly honest, the policy environment does not always match what the politicians are saying. That's where the disappointment comes in.

APJ: What policy support would you like to have?

PA: We need to see a much stronger commitment to nurturing private universities. For example, as of today, even not-for-profit private universities are not tax exempt which means that if and when we make surplus income, we will not be able to invest all of it back into the educational enterprise. If you deploy a VSAT system to connect to the Internet, you have to pay taxes to deploy the equipment and you have to pay taxes to access data. It doesn't make sense. It's like asking us to pay a fee to read a textbook. Those kinds of things leave us scratching our head about "what exactly is it they're trying to do?"

APJ: Give us an idea of what support the international community has given you and what kind of support you need from them moving forward.

PA: We've gotten tremendous amount of support, especially out of the United States, and it's ranged from financial support to technical support. We have faculty at Swarthmore College, UC Berkeley, and University of Washington, for instance, who have helped us with curriculum design and for reviewing faculty who apply to come and teach here. Some of them come as visiting lecturers themselves. That has been invaluable to us. We're getting more support from other institutions. We have a relationship with New York University. We're having faculty from Carnegie Mellon come and help us develop a course. Those are things that would be incredibly difficult for

us to do on our own so what they consider to be just a little bit of work makes a tremendous difference for us.

APJ: What kind of support have you received from Ghanaians in terms of philanthropy towards this enterprise?

PA: We have received some financial support from Ghanaians living in the U.S. in terms of donations but, overall, philanthropy in Ghana is not really operating at the level that it does in the U.S. A lot of Ghanaians are supporting family because there isn't much in terms of a social security safety net. That tends to be how philanthropy is done here, so there isn't a strong culture of giving to education.

APJ: Do you plan to reach out to other African students?

PA: We already have students from other African countries. About 20 percent of our student body are from outside Ghana.

APJ: What are your impressions of Oprah's school in South Africa?

PA: All I know about it is what I read in the press. I think it's a good initiative. I wish them luck, and when they graduate those girls, I would be happy to have some of them come to Ashesi.

APJ: There are many Africans in the Diaspora who want to come back home and do something in the area of social entrepreneurship. Walk us through the major steps from idea to today.

PA: First, you need to get a sense of what it is that you want to do and you want to make sure that whatever decision you make is based on learning about the conditions here. So the first thing I did was to research by initially talking to friends and following up with a full feasibility study for this idea

and really understanding what is needed. Then I had to build support by getting people around me to help me get it done. You certainly need your family's buyoff on the idea. You need to look for funding, you need to look for technical expertise in whatever field that you're going to pursue. And then you just need to commit yourself and take that jump and don't look back.

APJ: How did you cope with the naysayers?

PA: They were indeed many naysayers at first and I had a very simple response: "I know all the reasons this won't work, and I'm not interested in hearing them again. I'm just looking for people who can help me make it work."

APJ: On the macro policy level, if you were Ghana's education minister, what would be your top priorities?

PA: I would have three top priorities. The first would be to attract as much funding as possible to education so I would expand the funding sources to make sure that we're not only dependent on government funding but that we're also attracting as much funding as possible from the private sector. That would involve providing incentives for people to pump money into education on a private not-for-profit basis.

The second thing would be quality. We really need to pay attention to the quality of education and the essence of what education is supposed to accomplish. We need to focus on making sure the students have the skills to be productive but we also need to make sure that our students come out as enlightened people who can be real leaders and really change the course of our economy.

The third thing is I would really seek to rebuild professional teaching because it has fallen quite far and we need to rebuild it.