AN INTERVIEW WITH PATRICK AWUAH

Patrick Awuah is the founder and president of Ashesi University, a private liberal arts college located in Accra, Ghana. He was born in Ghana but left in the mid-1980s to pursue an education in the United States, earning a bachelor's degree from Swarthmore College and a master of business administration from the Haas School of Business at the University of California at Berkeley. He later earned an honorary doctorate from Swarthmore College. After eight years working as a program manager and engineer for the Microsoft Corporation in Seattle, Awuah returned to his home country to found Ashesi University, currently the sole accredited coeducational liberal arts college in West Africa. Awuah solicited massive financial support from the private sector, particularly American corporate donors, like Microsoft. Beginning with a pilot class of thirty students in 2002, Ashesi University now has 352 students, 87 percent of whom are Ghanaian, and 50 percent of whom receive financial aid. Awuah has earned international acclaim for his commitment to creating a model for quality private education in Africa. He spoke to Emily Gouillart of the *Journal of International Affairs* about the experience of founding and building Ashesi University, the future of education in Africa and the importance of ethics in curriculum building.

Journal: *Ashesi University is a small private college that stands in stark contrast to the massive public universities in Ghana, where education and student services are considered by many to be substandard. Are there elements of the Ashesi model that you believe can be incorporated into these public colleges? What steps do you wish those colleges would take in order to effectively educate more African students?*

Awuah: All our educational institutions should see education as a project of enlightenment and strive to educate people to become inspired citizens and leaders. There are many aspects to this, but I would sum them up as developing intellectual

and moral excellence. We need to pay a lot more attention to quality in our classrooms, in terms of our approach to teaching, our facilities and the relevance of our curricula to real world needs. We also need to pay a great deal more attention to ethics. Just as we seek to nurture the ability and desire to learn independently as students climb the educational ladder, we must also aim to nurture students to be self-disciplined with respect to their ethical compass.

You were educated in the United States, earning your bachelor's degree from Swarthmore College and MBA from UC Berkeley. Have you intentionally modeled Ashesi University after your own alma maters? Did you find that you had to adapt many traditional aspects of American-style liberal arts education in order for them to function in Ghana? If so, could you discuss those differences and how you overcame them in creating Ashesi University?

Awuah: No doubt, my experiences at Swarthmore College, Berkeley and Microsoft—where I worked after college—have influenced my leadership at Ashesi University. My introduction to the liberal arts method of education at Swarthmore had an especially profound impact on me, because it introduced me to a whole new way of seeing the world around me. I have become a big believer in the idea of an educational model that provides a very broad perspective and deep ethical bearing for its students. I am convinced that it is a superior way for any nation to educate its citizens and leaders. At Ashesi, the liberal arts and sciences have manifested themselves in a broad curriculum that melds the humanities, social sciences, mathematics and leadership courses, with majors in computer science, business administration and management information systems. The breadth of our curriculum thus includes both philosophical and quantitative thinking, along with an emphasis on professional thinking.

Ashesi has impressive numbers when it comes to students finding employment upon graduation. Do these students tend to remain in Ghana to work, or do they seek opportunities abroad? If more do go abroad, do you have ideas of how to avert the risk of "brain drain" by encouraging your graduates to serve in the workforce in their own country?

Awuah: Over 95 percent of our graduates are working in Ghana and other West African countries. We always expected that some of our graduates would work internationally, but that the majority would find meaningful and rewarding careers in Africa. I should be quick to add that we do not frown on the few who pursue graduate education or careers abroad, because in a very real way they serve as an objective measure of the international caliber of the Ashesi education. Also, we ultimately expect that those who leave Africa's shores will learn from their new

experiences and will eventually return to contribute to development on this continent. The most important thing we can do is make sure our graduates are employable and are able to take advantage of the opportunities available here in Africa.

You and your university have received extensive media coverage for creating a model of liberal arts education in Africa. Obviously, there is tremendous enthusiasm about the example you helped to create. Why has it taken so long for private universities to become a viable option in Ghana, or in Africa at large? Do you feel this was a failure of vision and innovation, or was it simply not possible to create such an institution until recently?

Awuah: Until very recently, private universities were not allowed in Ghana. The country had just three public universities, and the head of state was designated their chancellor. With the recent democratization of the country and the liberalization of its economy, the government decided in the 1990s to invite private participation in higher education.

You emphasize the importance of teaching ethics in Africa to help reduce the culture of corruption that has hindered Africa's leadership, from local leaders to heads of state. Do you believe that education alone can reduce corruption?

Awuah: The educational system is a very important part of the moral education of a child. In our society, students spend most of their waking hours engaged in education, both inside the classroom and in their cocurricular activities. Their teachers and their peers have as profound an impact on them as their parents and religious leaders do.

With regard to the causes of corruption in society, it is, in my opinion, a systems problem. In other words, it is an interconnected system with feedback loops that affect the whole. The action or inaction of leaders affects the behavior of institutions, individuals and families, which then influence the kinds of leaders society continues to produce and the incentives that govern the behavior of those leaders. For a problem this complex, it is useful to determine a key point where the system can be interrupted or caused to change course. That insertion point, in my opinion, is the educational system, as that system affects the ethos of future leaders. So, yes, I believe that education can be catalytic in eventually reducing corruption.

Do you see others following the Ashesi University model elsewhere in Africa? In advising someone who hoped to create a similar university on the continent, what guidance would you give in the development process, and what would you caution against doing?

Awuah: I have been contacted by a few individuals who are interested in following the Ashesi model, and I very much encourage them to do so. Any project of this nature should take its local context into account and make sure that it remains relevant to its constituents. Also, it is extremely important to be persistent and willing to learn as the project progresses. I would ask that the principals of any project like this one not take fundraising for granted. It is very difficult, and because this project is fundamentally about a long-term approach, it is not as appealing to donors who are looking for a quick impact. As such, it is important to find funders who are not looking for shortcuts for the problem of Africa's development, but who are willing to engage in the long term.

Could you discuss the financial aid opportunities for students who seek to study at Ashesi? As a relatively new institution, are you forced to maintain a student body that is wealthy and able to afford tuition, or have you been able to accommodate those from poorer areas? What is the socioeconomic background of the typical Ashesi student?

Awuah: Our students' backgrounds range from poor rural villages and urban slums to affluent neighborhoods in the capital city. Close to 50 percent of our students receive financial assistance from the university. We wish we could do more, but our resources are limited. In any case, the diversity of experiences makes for a better learning environment for everyone.

Part of your drive to create Ashesi University grew out of your dismay at Ghana's plight, exemplified by the fact that a military dictatorship ran the country when you first had the idea. Much has changed since then. What is your view on Ghana's progress in the last few years? Do you feel that these advances, namely economic growth and increasingly viable democratic elections, have already helped the educational opportunities in Ghana?

Awuah: Yes, Ghana is on the right path, and I am very optimistic about the future of this country. Democracy and free markets have been godsends. In my opinion, much work remains to be done with regard to corruption, but the important thing is that Ghana is steadily improving.

Ashesi's development has been made possible by generous contributions from private

donors in the West, including your former employer, Microsoft. Could you discuss the long-term financial plan for the university, including whether you intend to increase or decrease the amount of these private contributions to the university, and which new contributors you hope to attract?

Awuah: Our economic model is that the institution is established—and helped to grow—with donor funding, but that in the long term the institution should be self-sustaining. We are steadily moving toward our goal of building a sustainable economic engine. Over the last two years, tuition income has covered 90 percent of our annual operating expenses. This ability to attract local funding is a useful way to measure how relevant Ashesi is to the needs of Ghanaian society, and in addition, makes this a more secure institution. In the long term, we hope our alumni will be successful, will recognize the value of the Ashesi education in their lives and will choose to give back so others can benefit.

Can you discuss the core curriculum at Ashesi University and the mindset behind structuring that curriculum?

Awuah: Ashesi has implemented a broad curriculum that melds the humanities, social sciences, mathematics, African studies and leadership courses with majors in computer science, business administration and management information systems. We are trying to develop minds that are not only professionally competent, but that are also empathetic and ethical. We want our students to explore a variety of subjects, learn about their history and their role in society, as well as be technically competent in their field of study.

In the debate over aid to Africa, how well do you feel the educational needs of African youths are represented? Do you believe that large donor countries such as the United States have an understanding of how best to support African education, and if not, what adjustments would you like to see made to improve that support?

Awuah: The debate over the application of aid to Africa has not fully captured a very important aspect of education in sub-Saharan Africa. In most sub-Saharan African countries, only a very small percentage of college-age kids are enrolled in college or other post-secondary institutions. In Ghana, the number is 5 percent. This means, by definition, that those students will almost as a matter of course eventually be in charge of running the judiciary system, the police, military, hospitals, schools and parliament. They will be in charge of building infrastructure and running markets. For this reason alone, the substance of what happens in Africa's

universities and colleges is extraordinarily important for the future of African countries. Also, the higher educational enrollment level in sub-Saharan Africa needs to be expanded. Five percent is too low and does not bode well.

Interview conducted on 24 February 2009. Emily Gouillart is the Features Editor of the *Journal of International Affairs*.