

How to improve education in Africa

• Patrick Awuah of Ashesi University at TED Talks

Education Matters

With Anis Haffar



If there were a dominant, fixed polar star in Patrick Awuah's orbit, it would be his emphasis on quality meaningful education. Clearly a most potent generational thinker, Patrick's formidable commitment to raise a critical mass of ethical and critical thinkers to lead Ghana and Africa is a major blessing indeed. Without much ado, let's take a listen to his recent address at TED Talks:

Challenge/opportunity of growth

Africa is growing fast. By 2030, one out of every five people in the world will be African. And by 2050, the population of Africa will double from 1.2 billion to 2.5 billion. Even for the wealthiest economies in the world, this kind of growth would be difficult to manage.

This dramatic demographic growth will stress everything: infrastructure; public health; the rule of law; agriculture; competition for resources;

and the availability of jobs. And on top of all this, we face the difficulty of climate change.

Yet, built into this population growth, also lies potential. Meeting the growing demand for food, clothing and shelter; the provision of better infrastructure; the provision of services such as health care, education, finance, and even recreation, all represent economic opportunity for African entrepreneurs.

Consider this: even those countries that currently export products into African markets, would be wise to bring some of their production to Africa, to be closer to their customers, and to create more jobs on the continent, thereby helping to lower the growing emigration from Africa in search of jobs.

However, the benefits that Africa - and the world - can gain from a growing population will not be automatic. A positive outcome will require a productive citizenry and the enlightened, effective leadership necessary to create an enabling environment. Developing such citizens and leaders is the business of education.

Teaching, learning crisis

But the truth is, there is a severe teaching and learning crisis on the continent. The Africa Learning Barometer, for example, identifies 12 countries - including Nigeria and Ghana - where more than 30 per cent of children do not meet a minimum standard of learning by their third and fourth grades.

The quality problem is especially vivid in higher education, with many graduates taking years to find their first formal job, and employers reporting that graduates are unprepared to effectively take up many of the career opportunities that exist.

It's not that Africa is not scaling up education. It is. Countries across the continent are approaching full enrolment in basic education; and over the last four decades, higher education in sub-Saharan Africa has been expanding at almost double the global rate. What hasn't been done yet is scale up quality and effectiveness.

So, Africa is scaling up access to education. What hasn't been done yet is scale up quality and effectiveness.

We are still teaching students to learn by rote - a legacy of our colonial era, which focused on teaching people how to take instructions. Students are not encouraged to explore, or to question the status quo.

We are not actively fostering values of ethics and empathy, and so our societies are burdened by rampant corruption. The way we teach is wrong for today. It is even more wrong for

tomorrow. We need to educate people differently, and we need to do this quickly. The question is how.

What we need to do

The scale of the problem is so large that the solution will require the combined efforts of governments and the market, including non-profit and for-profit actors. However, the continent will need exemplar institutions of learning, clustered in East, West, Central, North and Southern Africa that serve as beacons to others; that are uncompromising in achieving excellence in teaching, research, and innovation; and that serve as magnets for the best and brightest to stay in Africa.

At Ashesi University in Ghana, we pioneered one model that has inspired others, and has produced significant results: Each year nearly 100 per cent of our students receive job and graduate school offers within six months of graduation.

One out of every 25 of our graduates have started a business, and most importantly, nine out of 10 live and work in Africa, impacting the lives of millions across the continent.

We have done this by implementing a multidisciplinary curriculum that emphasises critical thinking and ethical values; that encourages broad perspectives; and that makes room for in-depth expertise, with a current focus on Engineering, Computer Science and Business Management.

Honour code

Our students pioneered an honour code - now a decade old - that gives them responsibility for ensuring a spirit of integrity on campus, and most importantly, gives them the practice to become the ethical leaders our society needs.

All students engage in community service, building the empathy and confidence that come with solving real problems.

We are proud of the progress we have made at Ashesi University; but this is only one model. There are other centres of excellence across the continent, pushing for progress in different ways. This is as it should be. Second, we need to amplify our efforts

by working together.

By 2030, the UN estimates that African university enrolments will grow to 14 million. So, between now and then, they will cumulatively educate perhaps 30 million students.

Collaboration, ranking system

We need collaboration so, two years ago, we started exploring what such a collaboration might look like. We reached out to counterpart institutions around the continent and invited them to discuss our shared purpose and our diverse approaches.

Participating universities range from large established institutions to nascent organisations. They brought lessons from curriculum development, to leveraging technology, to forming industry partnerships that drive job placement and business creation. We call it the Education Collaborative, and it continues to grow.

The way we teach is wrong for today. It is even more wrong for tomorrow. We need to educate people differently, and we need to do this quickly.

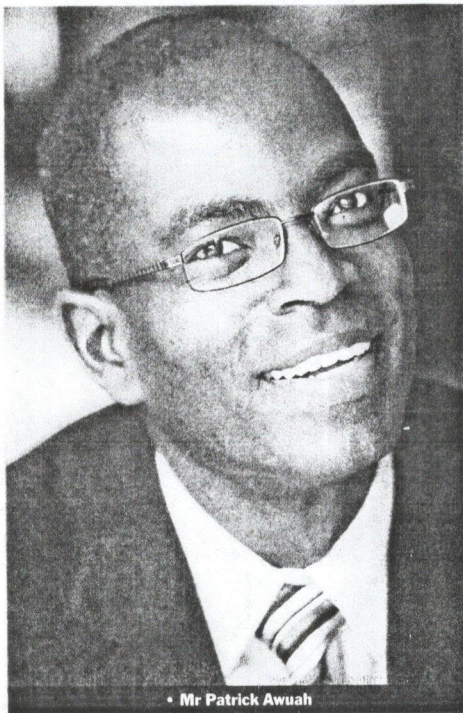
Finally, as a way of providing external motivation for institutions, I believe African governments and academic leaders need to come together to create a continent-wide evaluation and ranking system that focuses on students and their growth.

Most global ranking systems are not designed around the priorities and unique contexts of African universities. An African-centred ranking system would provide direction and strengthen the motivation of the leadership and faculty to focus on outcomes for students and impact in society.

Are our students really learning? Are they finding meaningful work after graduation? Are our graduates ethical and trustworthy? How prepared are they to start business? Are they writing for journals only, or is research translating into advancing economic, social and technological development in Africa?

The spectre of a billion poorly educated and unemployed or underemployed people, would raise unacceptable consequences for our world. On the other hand, a productive workforce, living in societies with ethical and effective leaders, would be good, not only for Africa, but for the world. Developing such citizens and leaders is the business of education. I believe that a solution is within our capability today. What remains is for us all to proceed with conviction and determination.

Email: anishaffar@gmail.com
Blog: www.anishaffar.org



• Mr Patrick Awuah