CASE STUDY

Educating Africa's Leaders of Tomorrow

Ashesi University: Creating a Center of Excellence in Ghana

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IFC International Finance Corporation
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ABOUT THE CASE STUDY

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WRITTEN BY

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PHOTOS

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, Ghana's education system was in crisis; underfunded infrastructure was deteriorating, and capacity could not meet rising demand. Of the approximately 26,000 students who passed Ghana's university entrance exams in 1998, only a third were accepted by Ghana's public universities because of capacity constraints. Those who were accepted still had to wait for two years to begin classes.[1] Also, the curricula and teaching methods provided little-to-no practical experience. Computer science students, for example, learned to code on paper as they had little access to computers. And women constituted only 19 percent of enrollment.[2]

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, the gross enrollment rate for tertiary education at the time was approximately four percent.[3] Ghanaian parents with sufficient means sent their children abroad for university, believing that would better prepare them for the global economy. But many graduates chose not to return, worsening Africa's 'brain drain'. For most families, though, an overseas education was too expensive, and few scholarships were available.

Patrick Awuah opened Ashesi University in Ghana to help address these challenges. Convinced that quality higher education in Africa would make all the difference in transforming the continent, Ashesi was established to 'raise the bar' and set an example for others to follow. The university's mission is to educate ethical, entrepreneurial leaders, with the skills to tackle Africa's pressing challenges, and the integrity to shun corruption. Awuah wanted Ashesi—which means beginning—to be on par with leading universities around the world, and accessible to more families within Africa.

Since 2002, Ashesi's enrollment has grown from 30 students to almost 1,200 from 24 countries across the continent. In 2019, Ashesi's net earnings stood at $3.79 million, up from $1.22 million in 2018. The university offers degrees in computer science, business administration, management information systems, and engineering. Approximately 90 percent of Ashesi's 1,370 alumni live and work in Africa. Its graduates are starting new businesses and being recruited across Africa by companies such as General Electric, Amazon, Airtel, Tigo, Nestle, and Unilever.[4]

While the gross tertiary enrollment rate in Sub-Saharan Africa has risen to nine percent,[5] just seven public or private universities were ranked within the top 500 globally in 2020.[6] Ashesi has taken on a leadership role to promote quality tertiary education outside its doors and to encourage more centers of excellence focused on developing entrepreneurial and ethical leaders. Through the launch of its Education Collaborative, Ashesi is enabling other institutions to replicate its graduates' outcomes and co-develop new strategies for teaching and learning. Ashesi is also leading the way in demonstrating how universities can tackle climate change and embed sustainability features across campus.

A NEW DIRECTION

Awuah left Ghana in 1984 when he won a full scholarship to Swarthmore College in the United States. He graduated with degrees in economics and electrical engineering, and was recruited by Microsoft to work in Seattle.

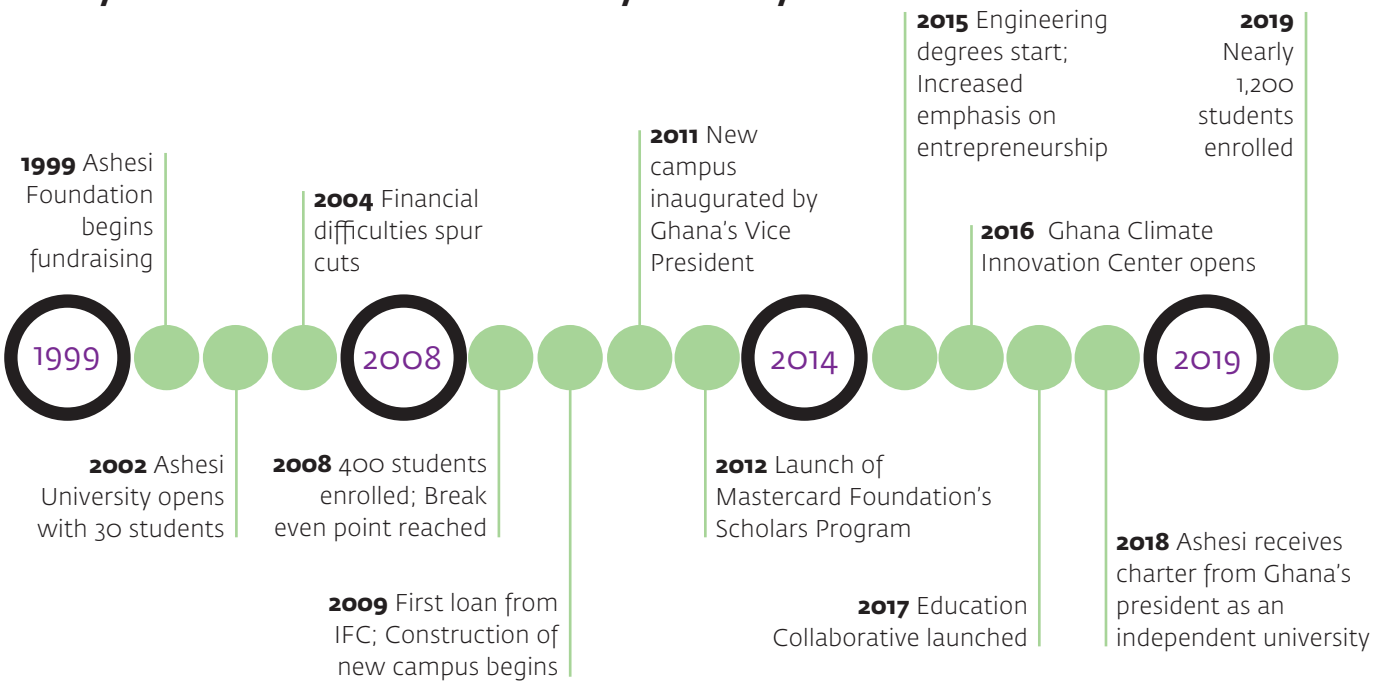
But after starting a family in 1995, Awuah decided that it was important for him to move home and make a contribution to Ghana's efforts to introduce reforms. Awuah believed that poor leadership was at the root of many of Ghana's challenges, and felt that his best contribution would be to establish a university that would educate Ghana's future leaders.[7] The university's mission would be to produce ethical, entrepreneurial leaders concerned about the well-being of others, with the technical and problem-solving skills to take on difficult, but important tasks in Africa.

Developing the Business Plan

Awuah went back to university for a Master's in Business Administration (MBA) to develop the knowledge and relationships necessary to finance, build, and manage a university. As part of his coursework at the University of California, Berkeley, Awuah and three fellow students conducted a feasibility study for a top-quality university in Ghana.[9] By the end of his MBA, Awuah had developed a detailed business plan and budget, refining it with advice from Berkeley's faculty and corporate advisers.[10] Ashesi was established as a non-profit because the estimated $8.2 million that it would cost to build the university and operate it for two years until it became profitable was determined to

> "To see a snapshot of what an African country will look like in 20 years, sit in a college class there today. Africa's future progress, or the lack of it, is inextricably linked to what is happening in African universities."
>
> — **Patrick Awuah,** Founder and President of Ashesi University[8]

Figure 1: Key Milestones in Ashesi University's History



be too hard to raise from private investors. Even with the most optimistic earnings projections, Ashesi would not be able to pay large enough dividends to interest private investors.[11] To accelerate fundraising, the Ashesi University Foundation was created and Awuah's feasibility-study team member, Nina Marini, came on as co-founder to lead the foundation full-time.

GETTING OFF THE GROUND

Curriculum Design

Ashesi's curriculum was designed to meet the needs of employers and to produce thoughtful leaders. It would offer four-year degrees in business administration and computer science, but for students' first two years, they would study calculus and physics, as well as economics, social science theory, writing, and African studies, which included history, literature, art, music. Along with lectures and texts, students would learn through discussion, conducting research, writing papers, and giving presentations. The curricula would also include a four-year leadership seminar. Small class sizes would enable faculty to mentor students more closely. In addition to coursework, students would participate in internships with local and international employers, and undertake at least 40 hours of community service to develop empathy.

To design the curricula, Awuah recruited senior faculty from three institutions: Swarthmore for the liberal arts core; University of California, Berkeley, for business administration; and University of Washington for computer science. These professors donated their time because they were impressed by Awuah and inspired by Ashesi's mission to educate Africans to lead Africa.

In addition, Ashesi would admit a number of students from low-income families—waiving some or all of their tuition. Awuah and Marini felt strongly that Ashesi's students should be diverse—from all income levels; from different geographies, ethnicities, and religions; and include an equal number of men and women. To become strong problem-solvers, students would need to learn to see issues from these diverse perspectives, and more.

Fundraising for the university, however, proved more challenging than expected. To demonstrate their commitment, Awuah and his wife donated substantial personal savings to the foundation, and Awuah also raised funds from venture philanthropists—Microsoft executives and Africans running profitable businesses in the U.S.

Accreditation

Despite the detailed curricula, gaining accreditation from Ghana's National Accreditation Board (NAB) proved slow. The NAB wanted to see facilities and faculty in place before granting accreditation. To meet these requirements, plans for construction were postponed, and instead a large private house was converted into a suitable university facility using funds raised by the Ashesi University Foundation. Faculty and staff were also hired earlier than anticipated. The initial faculty comprised senior faculty on sabbatical from the U.S. and Europe, along with recent master's graduates starting their careers, and corporate professionals with relevant expertise, who came from Ghana and other countries.

After a long delay, and much spending with no revenue, the NAB granted Ashesi's accreditation in 2001 under the supervision of the University of Cape Coast (UCC), a Ghanaian public university. For some years, Ashesi would be required to have UCC oversee its curriculum, choice of faculty, and students' results, and UCC's name would be above Ashesi's on graduates' diplomas. These arrangements continued until 2018 when, with NAB and Ministry of Education approval, the President of Ghana granted Ashesi's charter as a fully accredited, independent university.

Financial Challenges

Despite good early performance, Ashesi faced serious financial difficulties two years after opening. In the 1998 business plan, the forecasts assumed that the university would start to earn tuition income in the same year as when its operating expenses would begin. But the accreditation process required investing capital and taking on operating expenses well before students started classes and began to pay tuition. In addition, enrollment of fully-paying students

Box 1: The Ashesi Honor Code

In 2008 Ashesi adopted an honor code whereby students pledge that they will not cheat during unsupervised examinations, or tolerate those who do. Each year, incoming students discuss the code before voting on whether to sign it.

When the NAB learned about the unsupervised exams, it threatened to withdraw Ashesi's accreditation. The NAB relented, however, in response to impassioned letters from students and parents, and stories in the news media. The NAB agreed to Ashesi's approach to developing students' ethics, and the honor code continued. To date, all classes have voted to sign the honor code.

was only half of the 400 that the business plan had projected. There were three main reasons for this: Ashesi was a new institution with no proven track record; its admissions standards were high; and, at that time, there was a perception that local private universities did not match the quality of public universities.

To keep Ashesi going, the foundation cut costs by closing its U.S. office, and temporarily based all foundation work at the university in Ghana. In parallel, the foundation and its trustees raised substantial multi-year pledges to bridge the gap until the university reached its break even point.

ENTERING A GROWTH PHASE

As a result of enrollment rising to 400, Ashesi was generating strong enough revenues by 2008 to cover its operating costs, and to allocate more to its scholarship program, research efforts, and growth plans.

A New Campus

It was time for Ashesi to build its own a campus. The university had substantially more qualified applicants than it could accept, the current rented campus did not allow room to increase enrollment and expanding by converting more rented houses no longer made financial sense. Moreover, Ashesi's leadership wanted a campus to match the university's 21st century education.

This first phase of campus construction from 2009 to 2011 would support academic facilities for 600 students, and housing for 300. It would also improve Ashesi's offerings and foster a stronger university culture. The chief of Berekuso, where the campus was to be located, agreed to lease land to Ashesi rather than to a higher-paying luxury housing developer. He believed that a globally-recognized university would bring more benefit to his community. Of the estimated $6 million needed for construction, the Ashesi University Foundation raised $3.3 million. For the remaining funds, Ashesi reached out to IFC.

Awuah had previously met IFC's then-CEO Peter Woicke during his visit to Ghana, and Woicke was impressed with Awuah, his vision for Ashesi, and what the university had achieved in a short time. IFC agreed to a 10-year, $2.5 million loan, with a four-year grace period. In addition, IFC would help Ashesi improve its corporate governance and internal systems, and IFC's education team and Green Buildings team would advise on best practices. In 2011, with construction completed on time and on budget, the Vice President of Ghana participated in the inauguration of the new campus.

Ashesi's programs continued to expand, and by 2015 total enrollment was over 600. In order to grow to 1,000 students, the university began to plan additional construction. As with previous construction, Ashesi waited until its foundation had generated commitments for nearly 50 percent of the required funds. By 2017, of the $12.9 million required, the foundation had raised or had commitments for $6.6 million. As the university had met all of its obligations on its first loan, Ashesi and IFC agreed to a second loan of $6.3 million. This enabled the university to begin construction of its new facilities, and by 2019 the value of Ashesi's assets rose to $55 million.

Embedding Sustainability

While many of the campus' environmentally-friendly features were dictated by the university's location and design, they also serve to educate everyone on campus about environmental sustainability and set an example for other universities. To reduce the need for air conditioning, Ashesi's buildings were designed with natural air circulation and wide roofs that lessen heat absorption. A low-flow cistern sewage system reduces water use, and a biogas plant treats campus organic waste and sewage. Methane from the biogas plant is used for cooking, which lowers greenhouse gas emissions. Water from the sewage treatment plant, which is tested regularly, is used for irrigation and landscaping.[12] The campus has also implemented best practices for storm water to prevent damage, and increase water soaking into the ground. In 2017, Ashesi installed 720 solar panels to reduce grid electricity use. In 2019, solar energy provided 13 percent of the university's electricity, which saved $14,167 in grid electricity costs.

Box 2: Innovations by Ashesi Graduates

- **Sabon Sake,** a green business startup that transforms agricultural waste into soil amendments that regenerate soil health as well as isolate carbon to help mitigate climate change.
- **Cyst,** a software company that provides high-end tech solutions for its users through artificial intelligence.
- **Lead developers for a biometric coding system,** based on thumbprint technology that was used in Ghana's 2012 presidential elections to help increase voter turnout and fight voter fraud.
- **West Africa Centre for Counter-Extremism (WACCE),** which focuses on countering the foundations of violent extremism and radicalization in vulnerable communities.

New Program Offerings

As Ashesi expanded its campus and increased its enrollment, the university was also augmenting its curriculum and degrees in line with its second-decade strategic plan. For instance:

- First, starting in 2015, Ashesi put more emphasis on developing entrepreneurial skills. For example, it introduced a mandatory first-year course in which students design and launch a product or a project—skills that are useful both for starting a business and developing a product or process for an employer. Ashesi's "D:Lab", which was built during the expansion, enables students to produce prototypes, and the university's Startup Launchpad provides seed funds, facilities, and coaching for students' businesses.
- Second, following three years of collaboration with engineering faculties at various universities around the world, in 2015, Ashesi began offering degrees in mechanical, computer, electrical, and electronic engineering—all in high demand in Africa.

In 2018, Ashesi's enrollment grew to more than 1,000 students.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS

Scholarship Program

Over the last 18 years, Ashesi has remained committed to providing scholarships to ensure a diverse student body. Ashesi considers its combination of scholarship-funded and fee-paying students very important—not only to maintain diversity alongside financial sustainability, but also to demonstrate market demand for the university. On average, nearly half of every incoming class receives financial assistance.

In 2012, the Mastercard Foundation selected Ashesi as one of nine leading universities to pilot a scholarship program for African students. The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program would pay each recipient's tuition, room and board, and other costs for four years. From 2012 to 2017, the program provided full scholarships for 200 low-income students. In 2018, the program was expanded to provide scholarships for 240 low-income students through 2023.

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Encouraging an Ecosystem of Excellence

As Ashesi's business model developed, and the university was increasingly seen as an outstanding pioneer in Africa, Ashesi looked outward to extend its influence beyond its faculty, students, and alumni, and promote its model across the continent. Ashesi's leaders knew that to truly transform the continent, many more institutions like Ashesi needed to develop, and the entire ecosystem needed to work together.[13]

In 2017, Ashesi launched the Education Collaborative to bring together a consortium of public and private colleges and universities across Africa, as well as a select group of secondary-level institutions in Ghana. The Collaborative was designed as a platform to enable institutions to share best practices, troubleshoot challenges, and network—all with the intention of developing students who would become entrepreneurial and ethical leaders. The Collaborative

addresses the needs of university executives, as well as those of administrators and faculty. For example, it provides practical tools for classroom management, faculty-administrator collaboration, and techniques for training students.

The Collaborative meets annually to focus on a specific topic—in 2018, the gathering concentrated on building inclusive classrooms. In 2019, it focused on Africa's growing population, and the role of higher education in helping the continent harness this growth for social and economic gain. In addition to the annual gatherings, participants are connected throughout the year through research collaboration, mentorships, and faculty and administrator immersion programs. By 2019, the Collaborative had engaged 31 institutions in 11 countries, reaching some 200 teachers and leaders.[14]

Ashesi itself has mentored 12 institutions one-on-one—for example, by reviewing curriculum, faculty training programs, and/or student services. These universities and colleges are now emulating some of Ashesi's teaching and learning practices, focusing more on student outcomes, and improving university management. For example, one institution has launched a leadership and ethics program for the first time.

Ashesi is also benefiting from these relationships. In 2019, its engagement with the African Development University provided insights into how Ashesi could better support its francophone students.

Ashesi is also now reaching out and mentoring secondary schools, with its "Ashesi Before Ashesi" program to help schools to prepare their students for the future of work. Over the next five years, Ashesi aims to reach one-third of Ghana's high schools.

Fighting Climate Change

Climate change poses significant threats to Ghana's economy. Coastal erosion from rising sea levels could result in loss of land and forced migration, while extreme weather events could further strain the country's infrastructure and agricultural productivity.[15] Beyond its own efforts to achieve a climate-friendly campus and develop climate-related courses, Ashesi actively engages with partners to reduce the long-term costs of climate change and create opportunities for sustainable growth in Ghana.

To this end, Ashesi hosts the Ghana Climate Innovation Center (GCIC) at its campus, in collaboration with Ernst and Young, SNV Ghana, and the United Nations University.[16] The GCIC is a business incubator that supports promising ventures and local entrepreneurs to develop adaptive and mitigating solutions to Ghana's main climate change challenges. It focuses on five key areas: solar energy, energy efficiency, waste management, climate smart agriculture, and water management and purification.

Ashesi provides a year-long course to GCIC entrepreneurs covering ethics, leadership, business model and theory of change development, and human resource management. GCIC partners provide assistance with access to finance, product development, and more.

By September 2019, the GCIC had incubated 53 businesses, 12 of which are owned by women, and enabled an estimated 170,000 Ghanaian households to become more resilient to climate change. The GCIC had also created 127 direct jobs, 57 of which went to women.

In addition to incubating promising ventures, the GCIC is also helping the government to develop climate-related policy and regulations. The GCIC is part of the World Bank's infoDev Climate Technology Program and is funded to 2020 with $8.5 million from the governments of Denmark and the Netherlands, through the World Bank.

Student Profile

Maxwell's Journey[17]

Although he graduated from high school with high marks, Maxwell Aladago did not consider university to be an option. His parents were subsistence farmers and could not afford it. However, this changed when Ashesi students volunteering in his village urged him to apply. After looking up Ashesi in an Internet café, a 45-minute bike ride from home, Aladago concluded it was too expensive. But he kept his promise to the volunteers and applied. When he found out he had been accepted, and awarded a Mastercard Foundation scholarship covering all his costs, Aladago was elated. However, his mother was skeptical. "She thought it was a scam," says Aladago, with a laugh. "Thankfully, I did not."

When he began studying at Ashesi, Aladago knew little about computers, but he majored in computer science because he knew his job prospects would be good. During his years at Ashesi, he became a prolific programmer, taught computer skills, and helped develop an algorithm that used accelerometer readings from smartphones to assess road quality. As his community service, he raised funds to improve a school in his community. For his final-year project, he developed an algorithm for identifying the different growth-cycle stages of malaria parasites—an important tool for developing anti-malaria drugs.

In 2018, when he graduated, Aladago had a hard choice to make—accept a job with a leading investment firm, or pursue a fully-funded machine learning doctoral program at Dartmouth University in the U.S. He ultimately opted to continue his education. "In Africa," Aladago says, "machine learning could have an incredible impact by improving farm yields, addressing health problems, and solving other problems. After so many have helped me, I feel I must give back to help others."

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Comprehensive Assistance

In addition to its scholarships, Ashesi has also formalized its help for students to successfully navigate their time on campus.

- Each year, the Admissions Office identifies students who need pre-arrival support. Then, for five weeks before first year begins, the *Ashesi Bridge Program* helps students close gaps in their math and writing skills—key areas for academic success.
- To help all incoming students transition successfully, the seminar *Ashesi Success* enables groups of 12 to 16 students to discuss with faculty, staff, and alumni how to navigate social and academic challenges at Ashesi.
- A *Buddy-Up Program* pairs each first-year student with a higher-year student who provides "insider" strategies for navigating university. Ashesi also provides training to improve students' interpersonal skills.
- Throughout their time at Ashesi, the university provides comprehensive guidance across all years of study, and supports students who appear to be falling behind. The university offers counseling too, and pays for additional psychological therapy if students need it.

By 2019, this combination of support contributed to 94 percent of first-generation and low-income students completing their degrees.

Ensuring Employability

From the very start, Ashesi made students' employability a high priority, and it now has a five-person Careers Office to coordinate its efforts. Support begins during students' first year with seminars covering everything from writing a resume and cover letters, to identifying students' career aspirations and employability awareness.

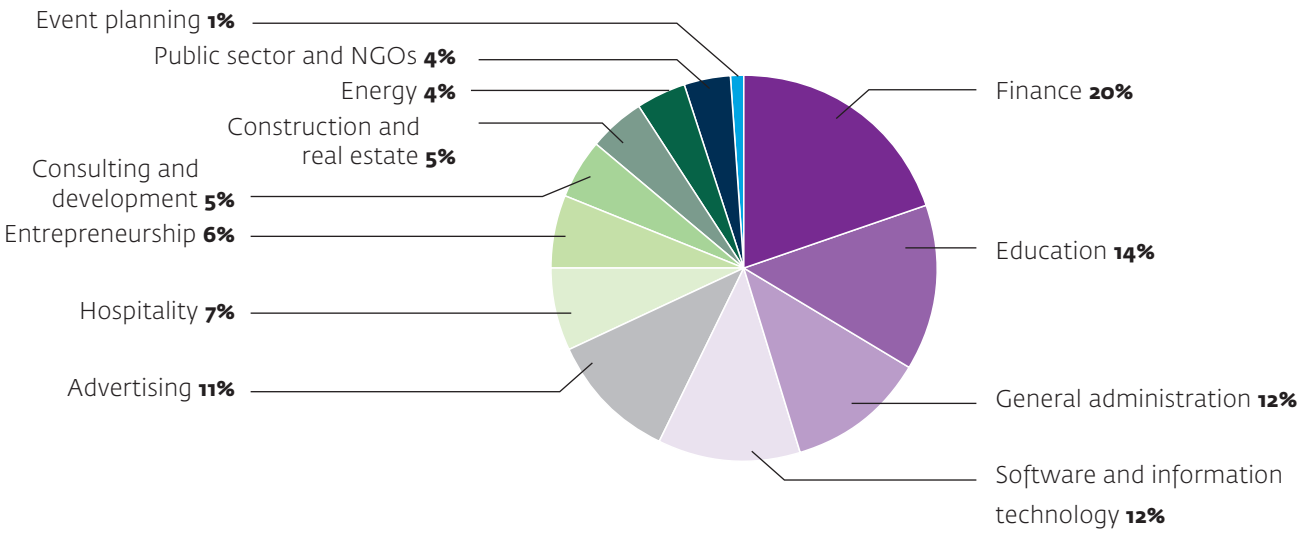
In their second and third years, Ashesi helps students search for internships and employment, and stages mock job interviews. Nearly all students participate in at least one three-month internship, beginning after second year. Internships are not mandatory, however, as some students must help their family during the summer break, or engage in research work on campus. Ashesi also holds an annual career fair to help students find internships and employment with multinationals, local companies, and non-government organizations. After every internship, Ashesi seeks feedback from the employer, and shares this with the student.

BOX 3: IFC EMPLOYABILITY TOOL[18]

In 2019, Ashesi and IFC collaborated to assess Ashesi's progress across four categories that contribute to graduates' success in finding jobs. The assessment comprised a comprehensive survey and focus groups conducted with students, alumni, faculty, administrative staff, and employers.

The assessment found that employers rate the interns and graduates they recruit from Ashesi very highly on their technical skills, as well as critical thinking, problem solving, taking initiative, dedication, high ethical standards, and concern for others. IFC's recommendations for Ashesi included increasing connections with, and among, alumni; further strengthening the university's relationships with employers; and raising the percentage of women faculty from 31 percent to 40 or 45 percent.

Chart 1: Careers of Ashesi Graduates (Class of 2017)



In the critical post-graduation years, Ashesi continues to track graduates, and helps them find a job if needed. Ashesi also provides first-generation graduates with extra job-search support.

MOVING FORWARD

At the start of 2020, Ashesi's enrollment stands at 1,174 students and the majority of its full- and part-time faculty are now from Ghana. The university, its leaders, faculty, and students continue to win awards and take on leadership roles in the public and private sector. Awuah, for example, was recently appointed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as one of 16 members of a high-level commission on the future of global education. Ashesi is also well on its way to advancing its mission and is using its influence to promote this objective across Africa.

As it looks ahead to 2030, Ashesi is now preparing its next strategic plan. For its next phase, the university is considering adding to its degree offerings, and possibly starting post-graduate education, executive education, and gaining international accreditation. But whatever the next phase includes, Ashesi will remain committed to excellence, and to its mission of educating ethical, entrepreneurial leaders in Africa.

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