

# Ghanaian Sees Education as Key to Africa's Future

Ex-Microsoft employee uses part of his wealth to found a university in his homeland. His goal is to stem the continent's brain drain.

By TOMAS ALEX TIZON  
Times Staff Writer

SEATTLE — Patrick Awuah didn't mean to become a millionaire. The Ghanaian native came to the United States in 1985 to become an engineer. A then-little-known company named Microsoft hired him out of college, and within a decade, Awuah made a small fortune in stock profits.

Soon after, he returned to Ghana and poured much of his money into an unlikely enterprise on a continent roiled by poverty and war: He founded a university. He called it Ashesi, which means "beginnings" in his native Ashanti language. Awuah hopes that his new, American-style school will bring needed change to Africa.

The school's temporary campus, in the capital, Accra, opened last year, and more than 60 students from Ghana's wealthy families have enrolled. The students attend classes in a couple of two-story concrete compounds in a residential neighborhood.

Awuah's goal is to build a 100-acre campus capable of handling 1,000 students and providing the equivalent of an Ivy League education. He gave \$500,000 of his own money to start the university, and a foundation he created has raised \$3 million of the \$15 million needed to build the campus and create a scholarship endowment.

The first years are expected to be financially precarious. But according to Awuah's projections, the university could be operationally sustainable once it reaches a steady pace of enrolling 120 students for each entering class, a level that he hopes will happen by 2007.



Los Angeles Times

The long-term objective is to help reverse a widely acknowledged brain drain that has robbed Africa of its best and brightest minds. Awuah wants to attract such people to Ashesi. He envisions a new generation of leaders rising from the school's ranks.

Such aspirations would seem a dream if it were not for the support of some heavyweight backers from industry and academe. Among Ashesi's supporters are executives from Microsoft and Hewlett-Packard, and professors from Harvard, Princeton and UC Berkeley.

Awuah, 38, who is married with two children, acknowledges the obstacles ahead. He is a wiry, compactly built man with mocha-colored skin and round wire-rimmed glasses. He described the provenance of his desire to build the university.

"The state of Africa affects everyone who is of African descent," he said on a recent visit to Seattle, which he considers his American home. He keeps a house here, and the Ashesi University Foundation is run from an office downtown.

"Africa is going in a downward trajectory," Awuah said. "This affects the way my children

will view themselves. It affects the way the world will view my children. This is the reason for what I'm doing. I'm doing this as a parent."

The school represents a spark of hope in the decades-long trend of economic and political decline in Africa, said Henry Louis Gates Jr., professor and director of Harvard's W.E.B. Du Bois Institute of African and African American Research. Gates, an advisor and trustee at Ashesi, visited the campus in May.

Gates said Africa's once-great institutions, such as the University of Ghana and Makerere University in Uganda, have slowly fallen apart with the economic collapse in Africa that began in the 1970s. The brightest scholars, those who would be instrumental in Africa's recovery, have left in droves and continue to leave, he said.

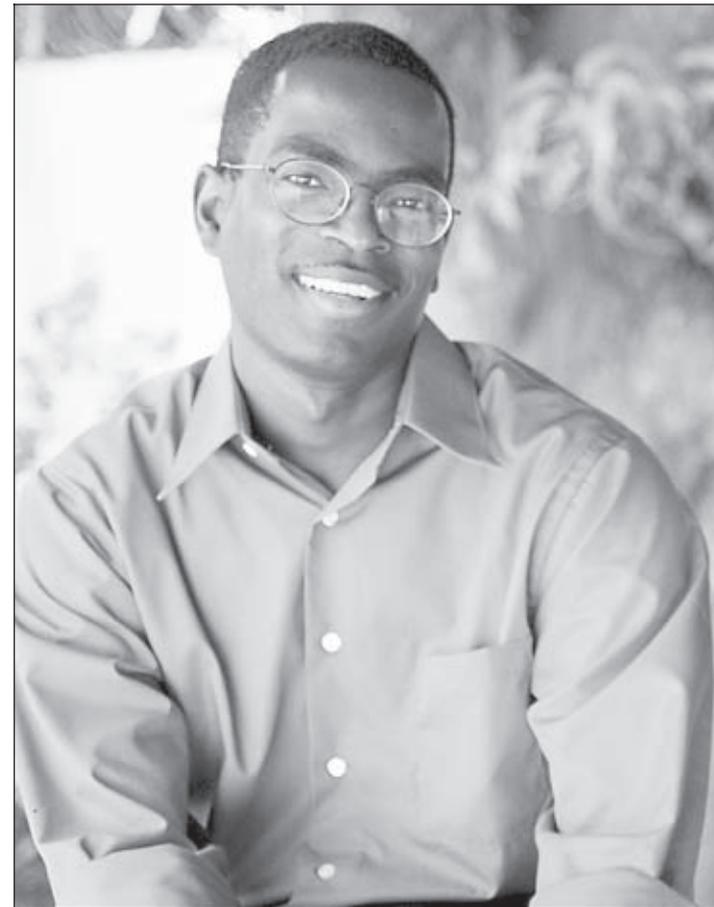
"I love the boldness of his ambition," said Gates, who said he believed that Awuah was attempting the impossible. "But you have to believe the impossible can happen or otherwise it's doomed from the start."

Gates said persuading would-be leaders to stay is "Africa's only hope for getting out of the quagmire it's in."

Ghana, a former British colony on Africa's west coast, is home to 20 million people. The annual per capita income is \$390. As in most countries, the children of a small middle class and an even smaller upper class will likely go to college. These are the ones Ashesi hopes to attract.

Charles Dollie, 17, from the Volta region of Ghana, learned about Ashesi through newspaper and radio ads. The second of five children born to a middle-class family, Dollie was a top high school student. He enrolled at Ashesi in March, using scholarship money and loans to pay for the \$4,000 tuition.

"It has already been life-transforming," Dollie said in a phone interview. He said the traditional school system in Ghana is based on rote learning: memorizing and regurgitating facts



TERESA DOMKA For The Times

**MONEY MAN:** Patrick Awuah founded his school out of a sense of obligation.

and figures. "What's so different here is they are building our ability to think."

Dollie someday wants to start a manufacturing business. He lives with three other Ashesi freshmen in a student hostel 10 minutes from the school. He keeps in close touch with his family in Volta, a two-hour drive away. One reason he chose Ashesi was to stay near his family.

The school offers undergraduate degrees in computer science and business administration with a broad liberal arts core. Ashesi's curricula were designed in collaboration with some of America's most competitive liberal arts universities — Harvard, Swarthmore College and Berkeley among them —

family struggled to find enough to eat. But he managed to win a scholarship to Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, where he studied engineering.

Just before his graduation in 1989, a Microsoft recruiter persuaded him to join the software company in Redmond, just east of Seattle. He became a program manager for various software projects, among them components of the Windows program.

Like many employees in those days, Awuah took advantage of the company's stock options, which allowed him to divert a portion of his salary to buying Microsoft stock. He didn't give it much thought.

"I was a computer geek," he said. "I had no plan to be rich."

He married a software tester, Rebecca Hulscher, and from their Seattle bungalow, they watched their Microsoft stock portfolio grow in leaps as the Internet revolution took place before their eyes. They became millionaires.

A turning point for Awuah was the birth of his son in 1995. He recalled looking into his son's face and feeling a deep sense of connection, and obligation, to Africa.

"One morning, I turned to my wife and said, 'What do you think if I quit Microsoft and go back to Ghana and start a school?'" She was all for it, Awuah said.

It took him a few years to figure out a plan. He quit Microsoft in 1997 and enrolled in business school at UC Berkeley to learn what he needed to do.

"How do you start a university? I wouldn't know how to do it," said David Leonard, dean of International and Area Studies at UC Berkeley, who is on Ashesi's board of trustees and has taught at Ashesi.

After he earned his MBA, Awuah traveled to Accra to lay the groundwork. He and his family — the couple's son is now 8 and they have a year-old daughter — moved to Accra last summer. Awuah expects to return to Seattle for a fund-raising visit in December.