

# Why the next wave of leaders is African

*(Image credit: Getty Images)*



By Heather Richardson 27th August 2019

A Ghanaian entrepreneur wants to establish his "leadership university" all over the continent. It's all part of his ambitions to transform the world's largest, youngest workforce.

Fred Swaniker is a Ghanaian serial entrepreneur – and his goal is to develop three million educated African leaders in politics, business, healthcare and education by 2035. By then, sub-Saharan Africa will have the planet's [largest workforce](#). The population is young – the [average age of an African is 19.5](#), compared to [42.5 in the European Union](#) – and booming, [projected to double by 2050](#). By 2100, the African continent could contain [40% of the world's births](#).

"Imagine 40% of the world's population without opportunity," Swaniker says, chatting to me from his home in Nairobi. "We're not only going to have an African crisis – it's going to be a global crisis."

To form leaders capable of driving the continent forward, Swaniker founded the [African Leadership University](#) (ALU), a school where entrepreneurship is a core subject and students choose missions rather than majors – building a business for bamboo charcoal, for example, or understanding elephant movement patterns in the Serengeti. They will work on six or so projects per year and are required to complete work experience placements.

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Last year, [Times Higher Education](#) reported that a number of staff members resigned after Swaniker sent an email announcing, 'we will not be building traditional small-scale universities... we are a disruptive leadership institution, not an academic institution.' He offered a one-off severance package, recognising that ALU's 'pathway forward may no longer be in line with your personal vision, beliefs, value and preference.'

The first campus opened in Pamplemousses, Mauritius in 2015, followed by Kigali, Rwanda in 2017. The campuses are accredited by various education councils across Africa, like the Higher Education Council of Rwanda, for example. Annual fees are \$15,000 (£12,360) for tuition and full-board in Mauritius and \$4,000 (£3,300) for tuition only in Kigali. At the latter, fees are loaned by investors and students pay them back when they start earning – similar to UK university loans.



*Students on the campus of the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Africa is set to make up the bulk of the global workforce by the end of the century (Credit: Getty Images)*

Swaniker is aiming to open 25 campuses total by 2025. Last year, a campus offering six-month leadership accelerator courses opened in Nairobi, Kenya, named ALX. Next up are ALX campuses in Johannesburg and Cape Town in South Africa, Lagos in Nigeria and Casablanca in Morocco. Eventually, Swaniker wants ALX and/or ALU campuses in every African city with over a million people; there are 1,200 students enrolled at the two ALU campuses and 300 at ALX Nairobi.

Swaniker, 42, is small in stature but big on charisma. And, it seems, he's not remotely intimidated by the task he has set himself and his team.

“Our objective is to develop the leadership capacity for 40% of the world,” he explains. “They need to be solving problems – like urbanisation, healthcare, education, infrastructure and climate change – and creating jobs.” Swaniker has assigned each future leader a challenge of creating 300 jobs; if the three million target is hit, that’s nearly a billion jobs by 2035.

It’ll likely be as difficult as it sounds. Deirdre Carabine, an educationalist based in Uganda, says that although ALU “appears to be a great African enterprise for a change”, the goals may be “a bit exaggerated.”

“I am not sure entrepreneurship can be taught. As for leadership, who knows?” she says.

Jamil Salmi, an education expert and policy consultant in Massachusetts, likes the concept: “Good governance/leadership is certainly the most important thing that Africa needs – not just focusing on STEM education, thinking that technology will solve everything.”

### **A new kind of education**

Swaniker’s mother was a teacher. His father, a magistrate, passed away when Swaniker was 16 and living in Botswana – the family fled Ghana when Swaniker was four, during the 1979 military coup.

In Botswana his mother started a small study group, which grew rapidly. When Swaniker finished secondary school, she promptly appointed him as headmaster. He later got a university scholarship in the US, after which he was hired by business consultancy McKinsey in Johannesburg.

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Prior to ALU, Swaniker co-founded the African Leadership Academy (ALA), a non-profit secondary school in Johannesburg. He wrote the business plan whilst doing his MBA at Stanford University in the US. McKinsey had sponsored his MBA on the understanding he returned to work for them, so in choosing to found ALA instead, Swaniker had to pay back his \$124,000 (£99,400) tuition fee.

“For two or three years, there was no money,” he says. “I made sure I had a breakfast, lunch and dinner meeting. I slept on couches.” Eventually, he met South African De Beers heiress Rebecca Oppenheimer, who invested \$5m (about £4m), and ALA opened for its first class in 2008. To date, Swaniker has raised over \$200m (about £160m) for his projects – about 90% of it from outside Africa.



*Fred Swaniker at the inaugural Business of Conservation Conference in Kigali, Rwanda last year (Credit: ALU)*

### **Avoiding the brain drain**

Like Swaniker, many of Africa's brightest students are educated in the US or Europe. The problem is that they often don't return, seeking their fortunes in places where conducting business and finding investment are easier. How will he stop that happening with ALU students?

"I believe the most powerful force for keeping our talent in Africa is showing them that it's in their best interests," Swaniker says. "Africa is a continent of opportunity. There are so many exciting entrepreneurial ventures to be built and there's limited competition, especially if you are educated and have innovative ideas."

In addition, Swaniker says, entrepreneurs need to be given opportunities to connect with investors – financing is one of the [major challenges](#) faced by African

entrepreneurs, with banks reluctant to provide loans and fundraising within Africa being difficult – so ALU is developing a global network of capital that alumni can access. He also wants to create a community in which leaders can easily reach out to mentors and advisors, because “being an entrepreneur can be lonely.”

Swaniker is hoping to develop a pan-African alumni network and points to the importance of community. “It’s a powerful force to keep you going, even in difficult circumstances, which you often find in Africa.”

*Networking is “a powerful force to keep you going, even in difficult circumstances, which you often find in Africa” – Fred Swaniker*

These circumstances are potential obstacles to keeping graduates in Africa. Swaniker has personally struggled with sourcing funds in Africa and finding “talent” (he spends about half his time recruiting – most recently, snapping up ALU’s own grads). He also has experience of the continent’s lack of infrastructure, such as [reliable internet](#) and electricity. Across sub-Saharan Africa, it takes an average of [115 days to get a permanent electricity connection](#).

“As an entrepreneur, you very often find you have to get into ancillary businesses just to support your core business,” Swaniker says. For example, entrepreneurs may need to invest in backup generators to prevent business grinding to a halt when the power goes down; load shedding – rolling blackouts to prevent the entire system failing – costs South Africa’s economy [1 billion rands \(£54.6 million\) a day per stage](#). (Earlier in 2019, load shedding hit stage four, resulting in an estimated loss of 4 billion rands or £218.7 million in a single day).



*Students graduating from the School of Business at African Leadership University, a multi-campus system across Africa focusing in entrepreneurship (Credit: ALU)*

Then there are the governments. “They need to set the rules, enforce the rules, and get out of the way,” Swaniker tells me. “Unfortunately, many governments in Africa are in [the] way of business, they’re in the way of entrepreneurship, they are stifling the activity and innovation of their people.”

Swaniker cites Rwanda as an example of a “highly efficient” government that is “determined to grow their economy and support businesses.” It has implemented [52 reforms](#) in the past 15 years, more than any other African country and its [National Strategy for Transformation](#) outlines how it intends to continue growing its economy, including an increase in Rwandair routes and a reconstruction of Kigali’s Bugesera International Airport, inviting more tourism and business travel. Part of the reason Swaniker chose Kigali as the second ALU destination was the country’s relative lack of red tape.

## The next generation of talent

Conservation is an industry Swaniker identified as a “low-hanging fruit” for entrepreneurial Africans, yet it’s largely the domain of Western companies, NGOs and philanthropists. “No change in Africa will happen when it’s driven by Westerners,” Swaniker commented at conservation conference he organised in Kigali in 2017. Facilitating this is one of Swaniker’s goals with the ALU’s School of Wildlife Conservation (SOWC), opened in the same year. This year, Swaniker set a target for 50% of the SOWC MBA intake to be female; last year, there were only two women out of 23 students.

The first conservation MBA students graduated earlier this year. Amongst them is Terence Chambati. Originally from Zimbabwe, Chambati was an “ad man” in Uganda when he stumbled upon the honey industry. He went from studying the branding to looking at improving the value chain and “how to address the big problem of colony collapse.”

This led him to co-found HuchiHive, offering tech-based solutions such as smart hives and bee trackers to make bee farming and honey production more efficient. This is a potentially lucrative industry that also helps conserve ecosystems, as honey bees, which are native to Africa, need plentiful trees and plants on which to forage. “We’ve moved past the prototype stage with the Huchi smart hive and we’re now going into the pilot,” Chambati reports.

Other graduates of Swaniker’s institutions address more issues in Africa. Eddy Oketch was a street kid from Kenya who led a peaceful youth protest in 2008, leading to his enrolment in ALA. Last year, then 27 years old, he came second in Kenyan senate byelections. Spencer Horne, from South Africa, has created autonomous airships to transport essential cargo to remote areas across Africa. Ghanaian Julia Agudogo has developed a method for screening women for cervical cancer without using a speculum.

“I can’t wait to see a flood of three million leaders of this calibre all across Africa,” Swaniker says.

<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20190826-why-the-next-wave-of-leaders-is-african>