

# 'Schooling Africa's future leaders'

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A school with lofty ambitions has recently opened in Johannesburg - its goal is to educate future leaders for the whole of Africa. The African Leadership Academy began teaching its first intake of 97 students in September 2008, for a two-year academic programme.

"The greatest need we have in Africa is better leadership if we are to achieve our full potential," says academy CEO Fred Swaniker.

Swaniker (who's CV states that he holds an MBA degree from Stanford University Graduate School of Business and a BA degree in economics from Macalester College USA), said he became a co-founder of the Academy because he realised that these leaders were not going to just appear out of nowhere.

"We have to grow them," said Swaniker. "That is where the idea came about of establishing an institution with the explicit objective of developing our next generation of future leaders."

Students are studying an A-Level curriculum with subjects including African history, literature, geography and languages - in order to develop an appreciation of Africa's culture and customs.

Corporate sponsors have come on board and so most of the students - from all over Africa - are studying on scholarships and boarding at the school, situated in Honeydew.

"Currently 95% of our student body is here on some form of scholarship," says Swaniker.

"Most have full scholarships which are funded by individuals, various corporations and financial institutions."

## **Student selection process:**

"We have a team of people based in different parts of Africa who go out and scout for 'talent'.

"They go to villages and schools where they make presentations exposing people to their search for exceptional youngsters," said Swaniker.

"We received a lot of applications through a mailing that we did to the headmasters of 1,600 schools in Africa. We asked them to nominate their top four students - those that they believe have the potential to change Africa.

"We also received applications through our partnerships with various organisations and non-governmental organisations who work with youth in townships and refugee camps.

"For the first intake we received 1,700 applications from 36 countries - only 97 were successful."

The academy has already received 2,500 applications from 40 countries for their September 2009 intake; however they can only accommodate 100 of these applications.

## **Student body**

Representing 29 nationalities, the current student body is made up of 53 male and 44 female students.

The youngest student admitted was 15 and the oldest was 20 years of age.

"By and large the students have adjusted remarkably well. Even though they are from all different backgrounds - they just get along so beautifully. They have become very close and support each other," said Swaniker. He added: "Not having met people from other countries, they are exploring each others ideas, values and cultures.

"Like with most boarding school facilities - students do miss home. Some of the students went home over our December break. Those who were not in a position to travel were hosted by local families (of South African students) over the festive period."

## **Student experience: 18-year-old Daniel Skumbuzo Khumalo**

Born, raised and schooled in Soweto Daniel Khumalo was 'scouted' to attend the academy through his involvement with the Johannesburg Student Council.

Khumalo, who professes not to be an academic superstar, said: "What got me into the academy was just being me".

"I filled in the application forms and was requested to attend the final selection. We were interviewed and wrote aptitude tests. Luckily my application was successful.

"What I enjoy most about attending ALA is that it is such a diverse environment. We interact with students from all over the world. We share ideas, debate, and it has been challenging to live with and discover each others' cultures.

"I am hoping that from here I can attend the University of Cape Town or a university outside of Southern Africa.

"This is my stepping stone to help the people on the continent of Africa. I pledge to share my skills and knowledge with everyone to help Africa move forward.

"I want to change people's perceptions of Africa - it is not the dark continent that people perceive it to be. I believe that I will be instrumental in realising some of Africa's hope and dreams."

Khumalo said in closing: "I don't want to see things happen - I want to make things happen".

## **Personalised education**

"At ALA we have made a conscious decision not to grow our admittance levels. We want to keep the classes small," the CEO says.

"The current student/teacher ratio is 5 to 1.

"Every student gets a mentor. We want to tailor-make this education experience to individual student's needs."

Swaniker explains their philosophy like this: "If we select the right people and invest tremendously in them, the impact that those people can have in transforming society, is much greater in the long term, than if we invested the same resources in a much broader group of people".

## **Inspirational weekly guests**

"In pursuit of instilling a robust system of values in the students, Graca Machel, Desmond Tutu and the Gates Foundation to mention a few, have formed part of the weekly guest list at the academy," said Swaniker.

"We try to bring speakers onto the campus with inspirational stories. People who can serve as role models or mentors. Bearing in mind the calibre of who we have already had, we are trying to maintain this level - but they do not necessarily have to be a well-known name."

## **Community projects**

Wednesdays are dedicated to community projects where students get involved with issues of personal interest in areas surrounding the campus.

Swaniker explains the purpose behind this initiative: "We want to develop their sense for action. Going out into communities and getting involved, they discover the needs and put together a team to meet and satisfy that need".

Eighteen-year-old Winnie Imbuchi from Kenya is involved with a project at Emthonjeni Community Centre's aftercare centre. "We are teaching drawing, sketching and painting art skills to the children with the aim of getting these young people to start their own businesses selling the products that they make," she says.

Another group of students involved with the Emthonjeni aftercare facility are trying to teach English and Maths to the younger children - who speak Zulu, Ndebele, Pedi, Sotho and Tswana.

Speaking about this project 17-year-old Rumbidzai Gonoa from Zimbabwe said: "We want to incorporate learning English with having fun. We are trying to find innovative ways to make this pre-school educational experience fun, memorable and interesting through use of colourful posters.

"We have been teaching numbers and singing the alphabet whilst playing in the sandpit. We play games such as 'Simon says jump 10 times'. Whilst jumping the children count - one, two, three... and they do not realise that they are learning because they are having so much fun."

Students are also establishing a library for residents in the Zandspruit area, and are working on setting up vegetable gardens in Cosmo City.

*Source: Sowetan*

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