

AFRICA CAREERS NETWORK



A decade of enabling
high-potential
African youth



African Leadership Academy
Developing the next generation of African leaders



In partnership with



AFRICA CAREERS NETWORK (ACN) IS A PLATFORM THAT CONNECTS YOUNG AFRICAN TALENT FROM ALA AND THE MASTERCARD FOUNDATION SCHOLARS' PROGRAM TO HIGH-IMPACT INTERNSHIP AND JOB OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS THE AFRICAN CONTINENT.





**ACN CONNECTS OUR YOUNG LEADERS TO
MEANINGFUL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES TO ACCELERATE
THEIR CAREER PATHWAYS AND INCREASE THEIR
SOCIAL CAPITAL.**



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ABOUT ACN

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



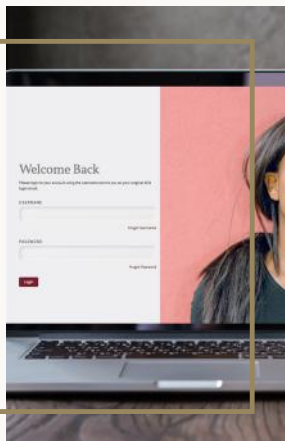
Through ACN professional development Workshops, Barazas, and the online curriculum, ACN equips scholars with the skills that they need to navigate transitions

SECTOR PROGRAMS



ACN is developing networks of people with similar sector interests to have them connect across careers, businesses and countries, enabling them to take advantage of existing opportunities to tackle global challenges, and ultimately enable shared prosperity on the continent

ACN PORTAL



The Portal is a web platform that connects young leaders to transformative early career opportunities (internships and jobs)

MATCHING AND PLACEMENT



ACN develops relationships with top companies globally, and through the ACN portal, connects scholars within the network with these organizations for jobs and internships

ACN TEAM OVER THE YEARS

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Founding Director



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Lifelong
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Chief Networks
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Vivian Ojo

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ACN TEAM OVER THE YEARS

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ACN TEAM NOW

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Talent Deployment
Lead



Michelle Peters

Recruitment and
Screening Analyst



Emmanuel Mvula

Community
Engagement
Associate



FOREWORD



We dreamt of young Africans returning home to opportunities on the continent. Opportunities that were meaningful and would successfully solve Africa's problems, which subsequently became known as Return to Africa. We began cultivating a network that enabled and empowered young Africans to connect with internships and work opportunities in Africa.

With over 3000 internships and 2000 job placements made, it is with pride we look back at the last decade and see what determination and hard work has yielded. Today, African Leadership Academy alumni and the Mastercard Foundation Scholars can enjoy these opportunities, owing to the valuable, solid relationships that we have with employer partners across Africa, giving them an edge in their professional experience.

In this report, we share the wisdom that we have garnered over the years. Where others have struggled to connect young Africans with internship and work opportunities, we have succeeded.

The journey, however, has not been without its challenges. We learned true wisdom is knowing when to accept and embrace the challenges. We have selected ten of the most valuable lessons that showcase how we have accelerated career pathways. It is our hope that these learnings will help others to replicate what has truly worked.

Senior Director: Career Programs
African Leadership Academy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHAT PROBLEM ARE WE SOLVING?

Amidst the unemployment crisis on the African continent, especially among the fast growing youth population, the UN Economic Commission for Africa notes that \$79 billion of potential revenue is lost annually as a result of youth unemployment. The employment crisis is well known, but the key data is always worth re-stating.

420
MILLION

Of 420 million African youth aged between 15-35, one-third are unemployed, with another third being vulnerably employed (African Development Bank, 2016).

55%
UNEMPLOYED

In Africa's most populous nation, Nigeria, 55% of people are unemployed or underemployed.

18
MILLION

It is estimated that around 18 million new jobs need to be created annually to provide for the youth entering into the labour market in Africa,

3
MILLION

Yet only 3 million are currently being created. This also does not include the potential impact of the Coronavirus on the African labour market.

(Acholonu, 2020).

An estimated 70,000 skilled professionals emigrate from Africa every year (African Union, 2018), and a staggering 44% of African youth are considering migrating for employment opportunities and escaping economic hardships (Nonjinge, 2019). This is telling of the employment landscape on the African continent. We asked the question, "How can we retain the brilliant young minds in Africa, and facilitate a return to Africa for our graduating youth who are outside of the continent?"

The school-to-work transition can be daunting, especially for young Africans. Young people on the continent face a higher rate of unemployment compared to their counterparts in developed economies. A substantial number of graduates, especially from African universities, are being forced into menial jobs for survival. This is true in countries where corruption and poor governance have taken centre stage in facilitating the low employment rate among the youth.

ACN's passion and mission is to enable African youth by connecting them to early career opportunities. While there are many factors that contribute to unemployment, one of the most significant is the lack of opportunities for young people to transition from university to employment. There are a number of reasons why this is the case. One is that many African universities do not have strong links with industry, that is, students are not being taught the skills that employers are looking for. Another reason is that competition for jobs is extremely high, and many young people are simply not able to find work after graduation.

We are focused on alleviating this pain point by providing a transitional bridge between university graduations, to finding that all-so-important and oftentimes, elusive first job, that sets up our African youth for early career success. We started off by testing this concept with our inaugural ALA class. Over the last 10 years, we have seen this concept work well, both with our alumni and the Mastercard Foundation Scholars. We want more African youth to benefit from a decade of hard work and learning. By sharing our biggest lessons, this report hopes to enable other organisations to do just that.

BRIDGING THE GAP

Bridging the gap is twofold. It is to connect university graduates to employment opportunities while improving career readiness and employability.

Internships provide an opportunity to learn the skills that employers are looking for. They are also beneficial in making meaningful connections that go a long way in career development. Further, internships create better networking opportunities that students can tap into. We have seen students helping other students through the extensive networks formed through internships.

A DECADE IN THE MAKING

Right out of the gate, we had our work cut out for us. Forming key relationships with potential employer partners, and helping

place students into internships was no small feat. We began to strategically align with employer partners and place ALA alumni into internships. We've had to pivot over the years to make the process more seamless and scalable. With learnings and proof points of this, we are certain that going forward, more young Africans will benefit from this program. Today, ACN is a thriving network that has helped numerous alumni and students with school-to-work transitions that have helped jump-start their careers.

We would like to pause for a moment to celebrate and appreciate the decade that was. With all its challenges, victories, and lessons, we have come out stronger and wiser. We've walked a road and carved out a path that others can emulate and benefit from. Here's to yet another decade in the making.



OUR HISTORY:



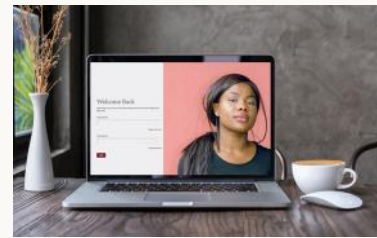
2010

Upon the graduation of the inaugural class, 35 African Leadership Academy (ALA) alumni were placed into internships.



2011

We started emailing out job descriptions to our alumni. A small team was assembled and tasked with emailing over 150 alumni. 95 placements were made, 60 more than the previous year.



2012

We received a 7-year grant from the Mastercard Foundation to build Africa Careers Network (ACN). The first version of the portal was a basic website to post and view opportunities. Candidates still had to email their application documents. 150 placements were made.



2016

Mid-term evaluation of ACN. We did the work, now it was time to assess whether the program was working. This was the first time we could use an external assessment of our program to make strategic decisions.



2014

ALA's inaugural class began to graduate from college. We were no longer thinking about just internship placements but jobs, and importantly, employment in Africa. This was the first empirical test of our hypothesis that ALA alumni would choose to return to Africa in significant numbers.



2013-2014

The inaugural Peer Coach Program took off successfully. The idea was for students to assist each other during the school-to-work transition through their experiences and networks.



2018

We received a grant from the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program to pilot two iterations of the ACN model: Peer Coaches at 2 University Partners and Train the Trainer at secondary school partners



2019

We pivoted to focus on sectors rather than African regions, building a team with expertise in each of our six sector communities – Agribusiness, Education, Governance, Health, Infrastructure and the Arts. These sectors aim to turn Africa's greatest challenges into opportunities.



A decade of enabling high-potential African youth

INTERNSHIPS

The Importance of Internships

A photograph showing a woman with short grey hair, wearing glasses and a patterned orange and black scarf, engaged in a conversation with a man whose back is to the camera. The setting appears to be an indoor event with other people and greenery in the background.

The first three lessons highlight the importance of internships, especially paid internships, in facilitating Return to Africa and retaining young talent. We will explore how the brain drain phenomenon in Africa can be reversed by helping to accelerate the transition of young Africans into the world of work and become career ready, especially in the African context.



Lesson 1

Internships accelerate transitions into the world of work

90% of those who had two or more internships have transitioned to full-time employment within 6 months of university graduation. 86% of those who had one internship and 79% of those without any internship experience transitioned to gainful employment in the same time period. This gap is mostly closed by the 12-month post-graduation mark.

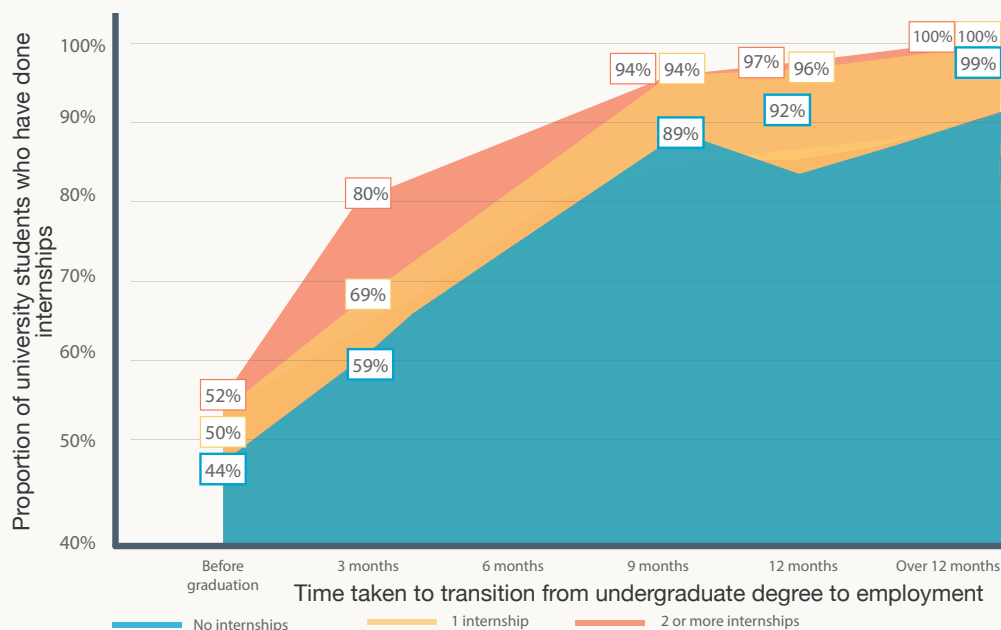
A 2015 survey commissioned by ACN across 49 African countries showed that a vast majority of employers do not feel that educational institutions adequately prepare graduates for the world of work. Entry-level professionals require significant support to become productive, however, graduates do not feel the same, highlighting a disconnect between employers and learning institutions.

Real-world skills such as communication, agility, and adaptability make students stand out in a digital and hybrid world. They become more competitive candidates when seeking full-time jobs, and accelerate the pace at which they are adding value in their roles. Many students, however, seem hard-pressed on how to best demonstrate their employability skills.

At ACN, we focus on supporting students to articulate and convey their skills, and demonstrate their work readiness through CVs, cover letters, and digital profiles such as LinkedIn. Supplementing their strong educational foundation with substantive workplace experience builds professional skills such as employability, content knowledge as well as 21st-century skills such as team-working, critical thinking, and problem-solving, communication, self-management, flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, digital skills, resilience, emotional intelligence, innovation, and creativity, and entrepreneurial skills (CMI Insights, 2021). That is why we place great emphasis on helping our young people get these opportunities before transitioning into their careers.

* ACN survey 2021

Do Internships Matter?



90%

of those who have had 2 or more internships have transitioned to full-time employment

86%

of those who have had 1 internship transitioned to full-time employment

79%

of those without any internship experience have transitioned to gainful employment

Taking a look at data of ACN participants, we can see that following university graduation 90% of those who have had 2 or more internships have transitioned to full-time employment, while only 86% of those who have had 1 internship and 79% of those without any internship experience have transitioned to gainful employment. This gap is mostly closed by the 12-month mark. While internship experience is not a permanent

hindrance for skilled university graduates in gaining employment, it certainly does help to accelerate their transition into their career.

To fully demonstrate this learning, we caught up with a few of ALA's alumni who have benefited from ACN. We asked them to share their transition journey with us, including their experience with employers.

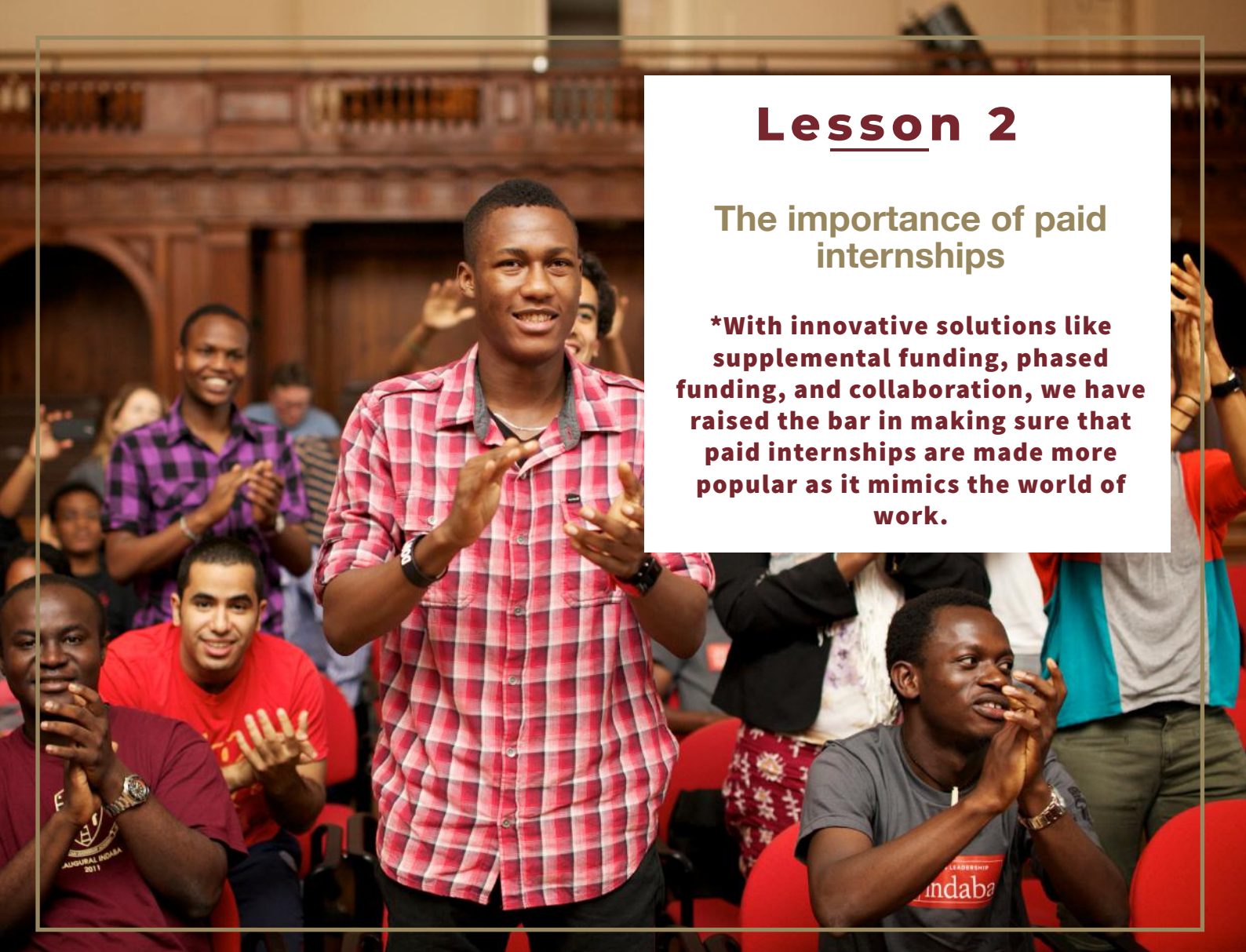
"With internships, you realize that within industries there are a wide range of opportunities available. You don't have to be a software engineer to work in a tech company; you could do marketing. You don't have to be a portfolio manager to work in finance; you could work in HR. It's this kind of knowledge you don't often hear about in school."

- Thandie Ramme, ALA Class of 2014

"I really wanted to fast track into the career I wanted to work in. As a practical learner, I didn't want to enter the workforce with zero practical experience. I wanted to understand the role, the industry and most of all the work-life balance. My internship gave me that opportunity."

- Renatus Mshomba, ALA Class of 2018





Lesson 2

The importance of paid internships

***With innovative solutions like supplemental funding, phased funding, and collaboration, we have raised the bar in making sure that paid internships are made more popular as it mimics the world of work.**

When done right, internships help shape the future of the workforce, both for young people, and the organizations they work for. While the value of an internship cannot be understated, we have observed the added importance of a paid internship. With many companies offering unpaid internships, we took the onus upon ourselves early on in ACN's existence to secure paid internships for our alumni by having conversations with employers in our network, and often supplementing stipends ourselves.

Simply, most ALA alumni and the Mastercard Foundation Scholars cannot afford to work without pay. Additional costs that come with taking up an internship become necessary such as commuting to and from work, accommodation, and internet access. These are costs that neither they nor their families are able to shoulder single-handedly.

We have also noted that some students use whatever they can spare from their financial assistance and part-time jobs to send home to their families as a form of support. Some of these students are the first in their families to have attended university, and therefore do not have the social or professional connections to tap into opportunities. That said, ACN acknowledges that the primary purpose of an internship is to gain workplace experience necessary to accelerate career growth.

Companies also stand to gain from an internship. Not only do they benefit from a talent pool that is willing and ready to learn; there's the added advantage of getting fresh perspectives and ideas from interns. Companies are also inadvertently establishing a pipeline of potential candidates for future roles, thus building brand equity with future generations.

* ACN survey 2021

Advantages of a paid internship

Given the importance of internships to accelerate access to the workforce, as described in Lesson 1, it is imperative for internships to be paid for a number of reasons:

1



For students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, paid internships allow them to prepare for the future without having to sacrifice financial stability. Young people from low-income backgrounds are not able to take up important professional development opportunities if faced with having to choose between an unpaid internship with career advancement potential and a menial job with pay but little prospect of advancement.

2



The dignity of interns is respected.

3



A sense of accomplishment and self-worth is instilled in interns.

4



Interns are more motivated to take the internship opportunity as seriously as they would a regular job.

5



Young people are more likely to select positions based on skill development potential rather than compensation.

6



There's greater accountability for the employer to create a meaningful project and development opportunity.

7

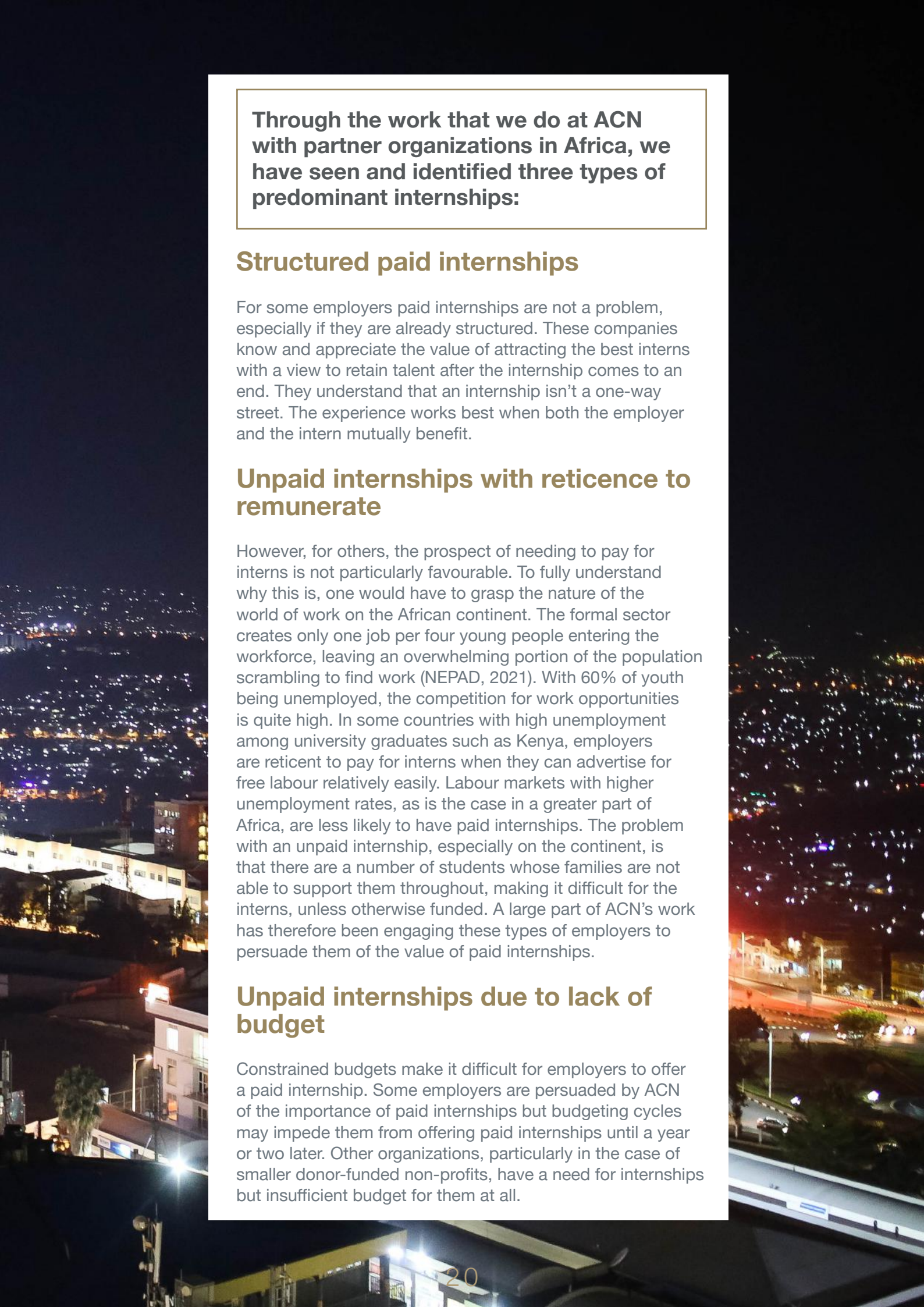


The intern is more accountable to perform and deliver.

8



Paid internships better mimic the world of work and remuneration structures. This further enhances the comprehensiveness of what is being learned through the opportunity.

A nighttime photograph of a cityscape, likely in Africa, showing illuminated buildings and streets. The image is used as a background for the document.

Through the work that we do at ACN with partner organizations in Africa, we have seen and identified three types of predominant internships:

Structured paid internships

For some employers paid internships are not a problem, especially if they are already structured. These companies know and appreciate the value of attracting the best interns with a view to retain talent after the internship comes to an end. They understand that an internship isn't a one-way street. The experience works best when both the employer and the intern mutually benefit.

Unpaid internships with reticence to remunerate

However, for others, the prospect of needing to pay for interns is not particularly favourable. To fully understand why this is, one would have to grasp the nature of the world of work on the African continent. The formal sector creates only one job per four young people entering the workforce, leaving an overwhelming portion of the population scrambling to find work (NEPAD, 2021). With 60% of youth being unemployed, the competition for work opportunities is quite high. In some countries with high unemployment among university graduates such as Kenya, employers are reticent to pay for interns when they can advertise for free labour relatively easily. Labour markets with higher unemployment rates, as is the case in a greater part of Africa, are less likely to have paid internships. The problem with an unpaid internship, especially on the continent, is that there are a number of students whose families are not able to support them throughout, making it difficult for the interns, unless otherwise funded. A large part of ACN's work has therefore been engaging these types of employers to persuade them of the value of paid internships.

Unpaid internships due to lack of budget

Constrained budgets make it difficult for employers to offer a paid internship. Some employers are persuaded by ACN of the importance of paid internships but budgeting cycles may impede them from offering paid internships until a year or two later. Other organizations, particularly in the case of smaller donor-funded non-profits, have a need for internships but insufficient budget for them at all.

Solutions

Working with diverse employers has given us at ACN perspective into some of the real issues surrounding unpaid internships. The following are some solutions that we have learned:

SOLUTION 1: SUPPLEMENTAL FUNDING

We've provided supplemental funding directly to students where we saw it was necessary. Initially, we allocated stipends and flights based on individual need. However, given the differences amongst interns, currencies, and employers it has not been possible to standardize completely.

SOLUTION 2: PHASED FUNDING

We provided supplemental funding with a clear understanding with partner employers of this being a phased approach. For example, ACN pays the full stipend for the first year of partnering with us, with an understanding of employers budgeting for paid internships in subsequent years.

SOLUTION 3: COLLABORATION

We took it further and collaborated with partner employers to build up a paid internship program. We did this by presenting models of amounts, payment schedules, and we gave examples of other employers who've done this. We helped a donor funded organization to build a 5-year budget proposal that included appropriate internship spending.

SOLUTION 4: INVESTIGATING OTHER OPTIONS

We investigated how interns could leverage other options at their disposal. For example, some students have scholarships with guaranteed internship funding. Other students have the leeway to apply for internship funding through their universities.

Lesson 3

Why internships matter to draw and retain African talent



“The competition for talent in Africa is just beginning, and both employers and educational institutions alike need to ready themselves for success,”

- Sharmi Surianarain, former Director: Lifelong Engagement, African Leadership Academy.

A new survey of more than 4,500 young people in Africa, aged 18-24, has found that 52% of them are likely to consider emigrating in the next few years, citing economic hardship and education opportunities as the top reasons. (Africa Youth Survey 2022, BBC)

The African continent is no stranger to brain drain. With a lot of skilled labour emigrating for greener pastures in more developed economies, a depletion of skilled human resources has ensued, hampering the continent's growth and development. By reversing the brain drain and creating safe spaces for young people to realise their potential, Africa will begin to reap the benefits of its demographic bulge (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2018).

Wonderful as it was that our alumni got accepted to good universities abroad, these institutions were not mission relevant to support ALA graduates in finding substantive internship and job opportunities back in Africa. This was particularly problematic given ALA's mission to transform the African

continent through the efforts (and presence) of a new generation of ethical and effective leaders working towards change on the continent. Reliance on the campus placement centers at universities outside of Africa was challenging as they did not have a full grasp on the African labour market. A classic example is Tom Mbega, an ALA alumnus at Cornell. Tom shares that he went through the university's career resources center but the opportunities were either all in the US, or if they were in Africa, they were volunteer / outreach opportunities. Tom's story is one that he shares with a number of African students in universities abroad. It is stories such as these that have compelled us, at ACN, to connect our alumni to substantive professional opportunities and employers in Africa, and to help them explore what it means to be working on the continent. We believed that the greater the number of touchpoints with Africa, including building professional networks and work experience on the continent, the greater the probability young Africans studying outside of Africa would return to live and work on the continent.

Transitions into the world of work is more than just matching talent and employers.

The next two lessons focus on building career readiness and how transitions into the world of work differ from one sector to the next. We look at how career readiness and transitioning from university to work is more than just a good degree – employers look for employability skills, considering the nature of the world of work in Africa.



Lesson 4

How transitions build career readiness

Starting a career is more than just getting a good degree. It's about having a set of skills and expertise that are desirable in a professional field. Due to the competitive nature of the labour market, especially in Africa, being career ready is a necessity. The working world is constantly evolving, and with it, the skills and expertise necessary for career readiness. More than celebrating merely our students' academic success, we want to ensure that they are career-ready – from marketable CVs to having transferable skills learned on the job at an internship. It is important that they have employability skills that make them stand out in the labour market.



Bigger picture approach

Faced with a growing population of ACN users, we started to see a lot more disparity in the strength of applications. Universities outside of Africa were doing a good job of selecting high-potential African students into undergraduate programs and assimilating them but they didn't all offer sufficient career development, particularly in the African context. We found ourselves giving very time-consuming one-on-one feedback and realized the need to incorporate more systematic career readiness components into the ACN offering rather than simply focusing on facilitating placements.

This involved topics directly related to careers such as how to write good CVs and cover letters, but there was also a need to strengthen soft skills and talk about the unique position many of our students were in as African students often studying abroad and wanting to transition back, many without the social capital to plug into back home given their socio-economic status.

So ACN shifted its focus from just transitioning into positions on the continent to offering more comprehensive career preparation and ensuring that our career readiness curriculum included topics such as communication skills, how to adapt to work cultures, how to get a mentor in the workplace, what career paths look like on the continent, how to search for a job, how to prepare competitive application documents, how to interview well, as well as professionalism in the workplace to set you up for success in your internship.

We conducted group sessions during reunions and then we moved to Baraza events that catered primarily to professional development and capacity building. We also started posting short articles on the ACN portal, and we reached out to universities to do sessions with them. Ashesi University in Ghana was the earliest adopter of this partnership approach.



We've also needed to instill in our students that there's no perfect internship. We articulated to students that it's not about the name on the door, but rather the experience and skills that they stand to gain to enhance their career readiness. Interning at a start-up or a big-name company are both incredible experiences with their own gains. It's just about working out which environment is the best fit.

In 2016 we saw alumni wanting to resign, often from really good jobs, after 18-24 months in solid but fairly traditional roles. They often expressed frustration because they wanted more autonomy and creativity. Other times they were struggling to align their African identity and/or global culture with that of the organizations they were working for. It was then that we realized we needed to coach alumni through more than merely writing good CVs and cover letters. We needed to coach them through seeing their longer career journey beyond their first internship or job. This included how to have difficult conversations with employers without resorting to jumping ship or burning bridges when they were unhappy in their roles. Having difficult conversations in the workplace is inevitable, therefore, being able to have these conversations is a skill in itself. These are the very conversations that can improve a work situation and hone communication skills.

Lesson 5

Transitions look different in different sectors



“The formation of the AL for the Arts sector community has enabled us to customize our career acceleration approach, given that workplace experiences and competitive applications look very different to other sectors” - Matt Maralack, Sector Lead: AL for the Arts

Transition looks different in different sectors, and not all transitions will happen the same. For example, transition into the Arts looks different to transitioning into the Agribusiness sector. ACN realized that a clear understanding of what successful transitions and career paths look like in each sector is necessary for efficiently and effectively supporting ACN participants to transition into the world of work quickly and, preferably, in Africa.

In 2019, ACN pivoted from working with talent and employers on a regional basis to engaging based on sector communities. Our sector communities are built on the foundational assumption that

intentional, organized groups of people can harness the power of networks to achieve greater impact in the work they do. This belief underpins the creation of six ALA sector communities, each of which provides an ecosystem that enables network members including alumni, thought leaders and captains of industry to connect to each other, share ideas and collaborate on initiatives that drive impact in communities. We believe that these six sectors - Education, Health, Governance, Agribusiness, The Arts, and Infrastructure - represent the continent's greatest challenges and opportunities for transforming Africa to achieve lasting peace and shared prosperity.

Strengthening our sector communities

While ACN has retained its focus on building career readiness skills for general early career success, the addition of sector specialists to our staff strengthens our ability to do a few things:

1



Build social capital in our ACN participants by plugging them into communities of like-minded individuals on similar career paths, providing access to mentors and relevant networking, projects and opportunities that will help them have fulfilling careers.

2



Immerse alumni in the hot topics and latest innovations in each sector to improve the value they can bring to their employers and entrepreneurial ventures. This complements and accelerates their on-the-job professional development and network building.

3



Customize our employer engagement based on sector specific needs, gaps, and “speaking the same language.”

4



Create workplace experiences that are customized to sectors where the traditional internship experience may not fit as well such as The Arts.

Although we have only made this pivot in the last three years, we are seeing the strong demand for sector specific programming through attendance at the various sector community conferences, webinars, workshops and networking events, as well as engagement with our sector newsletters which have grown sharply over this period. Moreover, in a 2021 survey, those respondents who belong to an ALA sector community found greater value from the ACN offering than those not engaged with sector specific programming.

While ACN’s initial approach to internship placement relied (and in many sectors still does) heavily on CVs and cover letters for matching and short listing, this doesn’t work in a standardized way for all sectors. The formation of the AL for the Arts sector community has enabled us to customize our career acceleration approach, given that workplace experiences and competitive applications look very different to other sectors.

“The AL for the Arts Network has made innovative strides in the way we consider preparing creative arts candidates for opportunities in the creative industries as well as the types of opportunities we endeavor to identify for network members outside of the existing internship and job opportunity formats. In the first instance, we have found the inclusion of creative portfolios in the form of a website or PDF to be as important as a cover letter and CV in the placement of creative arts alumni. Additionally, we have identified the need to include once-off “gig” opportunities, the commissioning and sale of artworks as well as the participation of network members in art exhibitions as part of our placement framework”

- Matt Maralack, Sector Lead: AL for the Arts



Networks and Relationships

Relationships are the backbone on which successful careers are built. The next two lessons show just that. Cultivating strong relationships with partner employers and building a solid network go a long way in the acceleration of transition into the world of work.

Lesson 6

How employer relationships are hard but essential to accelerate career transitions



Building credibility with employers was a large part of what we did in the first 5 years. Although the need for this has lessened given our track record, it is imperative to seek out the right kind of employers and put in the work of cultivating those relationships as part of our work.

* ACN survey 2021

Cultivating employer relationships

Just like relationship-building is essential in many contexts, having strong relationships with partner employers is a big part of what makes our work at ACN successful.

The early years of ACN were very much focused on building and cultivating relationships with employers. Some employers were excited to jump headfirst into a relationship with ACN, eager for high caliber African talent, much of which came with a global education and perspective, having attended universities outside of their home country. Other employers needed a lot more convincing and support to get them ready to take on interns at all, never mind then convincing them of the value of interns specifically from the ACN pool.

Some employers already had established internship programs prior to engagement with ACN, but for many others there was a lengthy process of establishing a proof of concept – the value of interns, selling the credibility of ALA and our alumni and only then moving onto the logistics of specific opportunities and placement. Building credibility with employers was a large part of what we did in the first five years. Although the need for the intensity or amount of time dedicated to this has lessened given our track record and brand, as well as strong relationships with a number of repeat employers, the importance of continuing to seek out the right kind of employers and put in the work of cultivating those relationships is still an essential part of our work.



How employer relationships are hard but essential to accelerate career transitions

“The massive support and participation by employers from numerous industries coupled with alumni engagement and curiosity confirmed to us that the job preparedness efforts and support we are undertaking are indeed the right interventions as we continue with the mission of developing Africa’s leaders of tomorrow,” - Ayado Ewinyu, former Director: Africa Careers Network.

Selling employers on the ALA mission and who our typical students are. Many employers are motivated by the fact that they’re not just getting a smart, creative young person with excellent credentials but also with sound values, and from an organization dedicated to transforming Africa.

Presenting resumes, profiles, and cover letters of impressive candidates we knew would appeal to a particular employer often resulted in them responding with an interest to create an opportunity specifically for those candidates. This approach obviously required knowing our students well.

Creating collateral using excerpts from interns that conveyed the intern voice in a way that was compelling marketing to prospective employer partners. These pieces enabled employers to see concrete examples of the kinds of projects other ALA interns had done and so sparked ideas for translatable projects and the scope of work in their organisations.

ALA alumni can sell themselves if put in front of an employer partner so we found opportunities to put employers and prospective employers in front of alumni. After helping them to become career ready, it is important for our alumni to continue building on their confidence and networking skills, and one of the ways was to put them in front of an employer.

Offering supplemental funding for internship positions, particularly where employers don’t have budget to hire interns in the next 12-24 months but would be in a better position to do that in the future with a proven successful track record.

There was a particularly strong win-win for ACN and employers with multiple African offices or employers looking to grow their African presence. We could get multiple placements from one employer, and they saw ACN as a one-stop shop for sourcing pan-African talent.

We had to advocate more with employers to help ACN users who were less career ready. This can take time, often walking employers through CVs to highlight strengths or transferrable skills and experience. ACN’s high-touch approach, which includes advocating for students and having strong relationships with employers is an integral part of the model that has served us well.

This ability to advocate for students, understand the relevance of their skills for particular sectors and jobs, and speak the same language as employers have significantly strengthened with ACN’s shift to a sector approach.



A big challenge from ACN's perspective has been the ability to employ appropriately skilled staff. ACN staff need to be competent at cultivating employer relationships but also good at engaging with graduates to coach them and improve their career readiness, as well as to assess their fitness for specific opportunities. A bad placement can be extremely destructive to an employer relationship, which makes this skill set critical. It has not always been easy to find (and afford) this combined skillset. Organizing around sectors, however, rather than geographies simplifies this difficulty to some extent. We've also recognized that it doesn't serve us well if ACN are generalists across different industries and professions. We need our people to have honed skills in their areas of expertise to maintain the relationships that we already have with employer partners, as well as new partners.

Simply put, it's not good enough to get students career ready and just expect them to be able to find meaningful internship opportunities and then jobs. Cultivating strong relationships with employers helps to:

- 1**  Broaden the market of available opportunities which encourages employers to create internship opportunities.
- 2**  Improve the substance of existing internships, thus helping employers craft experiences that actually build skills.
- 3**  Advocate for strong candidates with more hidden strengths and skills.

However, employer engagement requires a particular skillset, as well as time and energy to constantly build and maintain relationships and deliver value to employers to ensure they keep coming back.

Lesson 7

Unleashing the power of networks

Networks are everywhere – from our personal lives to business. We are connected in one form or the other. However, the power of networks comes from what you do with that connectedness. At ACN we know and understand that much of our success thus far has been a product of working through our networks. That is why we have also helped our alumni to build and maintain a network that they can benefit from. We have achieved this through our networking events and sector-specific communities.

ACN has been helpful in initially opening doors for students, however, after some time students can open doors for each other. Ashesi University, one of ACN's partner universities through the Mastercard Foundation Scholars' Program, has demonstrated the power of deliberately

and effectively leveraging networks. Ashesi University has an established career services offering, strong relationship with Ghanaian employers, and has always had impressive rates of their alumni transitioning to employment after graduation. When the university became the Mastercard Foundation Scholars' Program partner, they were suddenly tasked with trying to help hundreds of non-Ghanaian students transition to employment, predominantly in their countries of origin where Ashesi did not have the same employer relationships or brand strength. Ashesi University rose to the challenge, partnering with ACN, as well as internal stakeholders. Their success in maintaining strong transition to employment rates brings to the fore important lessons for others working on transitions, including ACN.

These are some of the examples from Ashesi University that stood out most to us, here at ACN, many of which rely on the power of networks and, specifically, peer networks:

At the beginning of every year, Ashesi had a session on ACN as a way to kick off the process of working towards an internship placement. The running of the sessions was student-led with behind-the-scenes help from an ACN staff member. It was far more effective having this delivered by peers, rather than a Mastercard Foundation program manager, career center staff member, or ACN staff member.

Ashesi trained peer coaches on ACN specifications of CVs and cover letters. Each peer coach was assigned about 10 scholars to work with between September and December of that year so that by January the next year almost all scholars had their CVs and cover letters reviewed by someone in accordance with ACN specifications.

For many younger Mastercard Foundation Scholars at Ashesi, the process of applying for one opportunity after the other, only to be rejected, was disheartening and often resulted in dissatisfaction with the application channels (e.g. the ACN portal). One of the ways Ashesi worked to mitigate this

was to invite an older cohort of scholars to speak to a younger cohort about their experience with ACN. For example, "In my first year, I submitted 10 applications but got nowhere. In the next year, I got 3 interviews and 1 placement." This helped scholars realize the work they needed to put in and also that their success did not lie solely with ACN. It was a mutual effort.

Ashesi administered surveys after every internship and consistently found that the number one way interns were finding their internships was through personal contacts and networks, i.e. other the Mastercard Foundation Scholars, Ashesi students, faculty, and staff. Ashesi, therefore, undertook extensive de-briefing sessions after internships and talked about those relationships being part of scholars' networks. Ashesi also had sessions to discuss networks and actively encouraged scholars to connect each other where they knew of someone's interests and had someone to whom they could make an introduction.



The strength of peer networks has also been recognized by employers. The Dalberg Group is an ACN employer partner, like many others, that already had an internship program when beginning their relationship with ACN. However, it was the strength of the ALA alumni connection, where ALA interns supported each other tremendously despite coming from different universities, that influenced changes to Dalberg's internship program with a move towards deliberately cultivating internship cohorts and classes.

In an interview with ALA alumnus Tom Mbega, we discussed the power of the ALA alumni network. He had this to say, "If anyone from ALA were to reach out to me for career advice or assistance, I would make it a priority to help them, based purely on the fact that they went to ALA. However, my Cornell networks have been more active and proactive

when it comes to reaching out and making connections, but the discussions are predominantly US focused. The Cornell platform allows you to find other alumni with relevant profiles. This isn't possible on the ACN platform, but I've had traction by posting opportunities in ALA alumni WhatsApp groups, being asked for referrals and I've helped coach some who've applied. I have also been contacted by ALA alumni who find me on LinkedIn."

ACN has certainly had to do some work to sell the value of internships to many African-based employers and to a degree, some undergraduate students. Initially, most alumni were at universities where an internship culture already existed. Working with alumni who'd already acquired this culture from their peers and been persuaded of the value of an internship in their professional journey, helped ACN tremendously, a further testament to the positive effect of peer influence.



Models of Transitions Programs

Career readiness is something that has to be supported from an institutional level. The final three lessons exemplify how important career readiness is before going into tertiary education. We see this strongly in how ACN has worked to become a valuable resource in facilitating placements.



Lesson 8

Why career readiness development should begin in high school

“We provided a high-quality curriculum and teacher support by packaging ACN curriculum to train high school teachers to begin to teach this in high school. This helped us learn how to create content packaged for being delivered by others, thereby increasing the reach of ACN’s career readiness training.”

- Ayado Ewinyu, Former Director: Early Career Success

Given how the workspace has evolved, career readiness is not something that students should hear about for the first time in their final year of university. Career readiness should be taught from high school. High school standards should align with the demands of not only college but careers by reflecting the necessary skills that are needed to succeed at work. We have seen this firsthand as

ACN. One of the ways we did this was by providing a high-quality curriculum and teacher support.

In 2011 and 2012, ACN teamed up with ALA’s faculty to integrate the preparation of CVs and cover letters into course work so that students were taught, graded, and received feedback on this vital part of early career success. Building on this experience, in 2018 and 2019 we tailored and packaged ACN curriculum and trained teachers to begin teaching some of the content in high schools in Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Uganda.

When working with schools we had 110 schools with 3 teachers each, spread across multiple districts and locations, each with different needs. While we decided to discontinue the delivery of career readiness training to high school teachers and students, an important learning for us was the importance and effectiveness of building out general early career success resources that can be delivered at a greater scale through other partners, such as universities or peer coaches.

Lesson 9

Career readiness support and institution-wide infrastructure and resources

“ACN’s major strengths in a number of markets means that we are a valuable resource for university career offices trying to facilitate placements for their Pan-African students in countries where universities do not have employer relationships.”

The power of collaboration

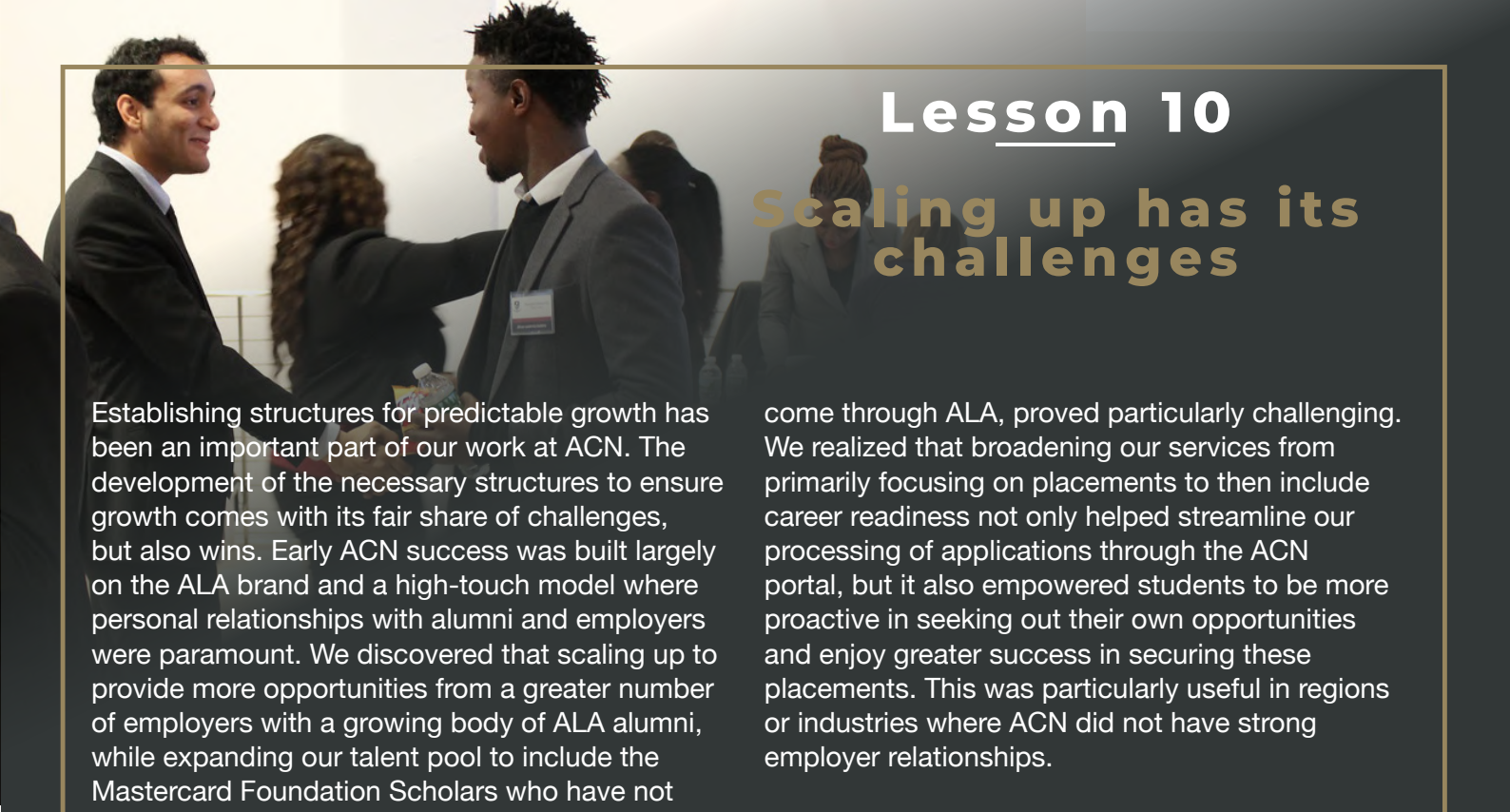
The sum of the whole is greater than its parts, which is why working collaboratively produces greater results. A huge part of our success at ACN lies in our ability to collaborate and work in synergy with partners like Ashesi. This ensures that students develop their career readiness, an important outcome, as well as input, to successfully securing internship, and then job, opportunities. ACN is in a unique position working with universities and their career services to bolster the value add of both ACN and the university career services functions with whom we are working. While we have seen this in varying degrees across many university partnerships, the case study of working with Ashesi is helpfully illustrative.

Although we don’t have employer relationships consistently throughout Africa, our major strengths in a number of markets means that we are a valuable resource for university career offices trying to facilitate placements for their African students where they do not themselves have relationships.

ACN’s partnership with universities has also helped strengthen students’ career readiness so that they’re more competitive candidates even when seeking out internships through other avenues. For example, while internships secured through the ACN portal represented a minor portion of Ashesi’s Mastercard Foundation Scholar internships, Ashesi’s work with ACN and its cycle of internship preparation was instrumental in Ashesi’s professional development work.

Importantly, not only did ACN affect the career services made to the Mastercard Foundation Scholars at Ashesi University, but also the institution’s career services, overall. This general institutional impact was due to the fact that Ashesi served its the Mastercard Foundation Scholars by inculcating career support to them into Ashesi’s general career services office. Despite the additional work required to integrate into an existing function, this model had a number of advantages:

- Ashesi career services team were enabled to support the efforts of the Mastercard Foundation.
- Students had access to an alternative transitions coach if they needed a different coach.
- More resources were provided to students where necessary, this allowed for more diverse peer networking across cohorts.
- Valuable perspective was gained. One key perspective was understanding the difference in what is meant by a paid internship for scholars and non-scholars. This prompted a fund to help with the small hidden costs that the Mastercard Foundation Scholars often encounter when taking up an internship opportunity.
- The workload for the career services team was effectively spread out given the reliance of the Mastercard Foundation on ACN.



Lesson 10

Scaling up has its challenges

Establishing structures for predictable growth has been an important part of our work at ACN. The development of the necessary structures to ensure growth comes with its fair share of challenges, but also wins. Early ACN success was built largely on the ALA brand and a high-touch model where personal relationships with alumni and employers were paramount. We discovered that scaling up to provide more opportunities from a greater number of employers with a growing body of ALA alumni, while expanding our talent pool to include the Mastercard Foundation Scholars who have not

come through ALA, proved particularly challenging. We realized that broadening our services from primarily focusing on placements to then include career readiness not only helped streamline our processing of applications through the ACN portal, but it also empowered students to be more proactive in seeking out their own opportunities and enjoy greater success in securing these placements. This was particularly useful in regions or industries where ACN did not have strong employer relationships.

The first attempts to provide career readiness training were extremely taxing on time and human capital and required us scaling up our own staff time almost proportionately to the scaling up of the number of ACN users being served. Because of this we quickly began testing out more efficient options.

We promptly conceded that ACN can't be everything to everyone. We could not be the sole providers of career readiness support and opportunities and so encouraged alumni not to rely solely on ACN. For example, getting help on their CVs from the career centers at the universities that they were attending and using the ACN portal as one of the many places to look for internship opportunities, not the only place.

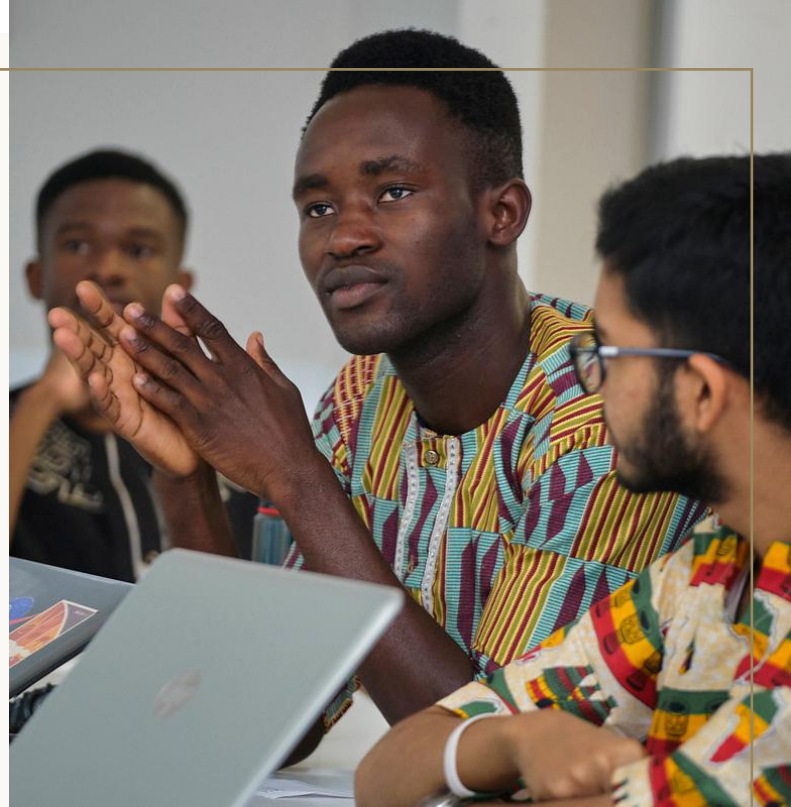
We employed the use of technology in various aspects of the development process:

1. In the early days opportunities were disseminated by the ACN team by emailing the entire ALA alumni database with dozens of attachments of available opportunities. Potential candidates would then email back their application materials. As our number of ACN users and available opportunities grew, this became cumbersome and unsustainable. We, therefore, built a career portal, to simply enable students to visit and search for relevant opportunities. Gradually over several iterations, it has become a tool to enable more streamlined processing by ACN reviewers even allowing university partners to participate in initial reviewing of application documents. It also allows students to update
- and input their own data, and create their own CVs thereby strengthening the portal's ability to suggest potential opportunities to candidates and seek out the right kinds of employers and opportunities to meet the demands of our portal users. ACN staff can reach out to specific candidates with relevant opportunities they may be interested in and additionally advocate for students they may not already know well. Additionally, these technological improvements have strengthened our ability to monitor customer service, and collect and analyse data which helps us to measure the effectiveness of the placement components of ACN.
2. We have had to iterate our portal several times to provide open access to our career readiness curriculum that can be accessed asynchronously. It has not been as simple as coming up with content and posting it to the portal. A lot of research and development had to go into making it what it is today.
3. Our ability to offer virtual group professional development training was accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. This ultimately expanded the dissemination of our content to more of our geographically dispersed users and provided a greater impetus to package our content in a modular fashion.

We leveraged university partners through a Train the Trainer (TTT) approach to bolster career readiness, and also ease the burden of reviewing applications.

By leveraging the strength of peers and peer networks,

We have budding relationships with a growing number of employers, most of whom understand the need for internships and do not seek out frequent one-on-one engagement. We have also begun group workshops with employer partners that allow us to provide support and engage with more than one employer at a time. We have therefore unlocked a powerful peer support where employers collaborate and learn from each other. One example was an employer group workshop, facilitated by ACN, on how to fund internships.



We have seen first-hand the negative impact of inadequately investing in human capital as well as using inappropriate technology on our ability to properly and reliably serve our internship and job seekers program, together with employers. When we under-invested in our human capital and invested in technology in a way that was not fit-for-

purpose – which unsurprisingly ended up actually costing more in the long run - our customer service and satisfaction were severely compromised. Conversely, we've seen the positive impacts of appropriately investing in human capital and fit-for-purpose technology to better scale up our impact.

CONCLUSION

“The standards of the world are too low for Africa. If we are going to catch up, we need to be going faster. It’s not about copying best practice; it’s about creating our own practice.”

-Fred Swaniker



With the benefit of hindsight firmly in our grasp, we look forward to continuing on the current trajectory and perhaps exceeding it. Having put in the sweat equity, 10 years on, we have garnered some real, take-to-the-bank learnings. We hope that the lessons we've shared will be useful for all those working to prepare students to be career-ready in the African context. We have certainly seen from very early on that the world of work in Africa is vastly different from other economies, given the continent's problems that need solving. It is with this unique perspective that we want our young people to bring solutions to their internships, and subsequently, jobs. We look forward with a level of pride in what we have achieved, together with an informed optimism for the future of ACN to continue impacting the lives of young Africans meaningfully.



The progress of young people in Africa will be the single most important determinant of the future and prosperity of the continent. By 2030, a quarter of the world's population would be resident in Africa, and the region is projected to expand the size of its workforce by more than the rest of the world combined. This implies that Africa's growth and that of the rest of the world can be powered by these young people if they receive the right education and opportunities to thrive and develop to their full potential. Africa then has a demographic advantage. If Africa can leverage this demographic advantage, it would be able to unleash new economic possibilities and change the tides of poverty in the region.

One sure way to leverage this demographic advantage is to ensure that young people transition successfully from school to work, connecting them to the right fit opportunities that ensure meaningful employment, accelerated careers, and impactful jobs. Our commitment to this mission is unwavering.

In the coming years, Africa Careers Networks will leverage technology to drive skills development in ways that identify every individual's career goals and skills gap to develop a unique development plan which ensures a ready fit for the world of work. We at ACN will work closely with our employer partners to develop a strong pipeline of best-fit opportunities, reinforcing our mission of ensuring our alumni and scholars access accelerated careers. We are looking forward to strengthening our position as reliable technical partners and thought leaders by mining and sharing relevant data on youth development, career services, and graduate employability in Africa.

We take this opportunity to invite you on a journey with us as we shape the future of the African continent.

Dr. Vandyck Lomotey

Director: Early Career Success
African Leadership Academy

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A young woman with a warm smile is the central figure, wearing a vibrant red turban and a colorful, patterned scarf. She holds a silver microphone, suggesting she is speaking or performing. The background is a large, detailed painting of an elephant's head, rendered in earthy tones. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter and decorative, thin orange lines that form abstract, flowing shapes. The text 'A decade of enabling high-potential African youth' is prominently displayed in white, bold, sans-serif font across the lower half of the image.

A decade of enabling high-potential African youth



African Leadership Academy

Developing the next generation of African leaders

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