

Speech: British High Commissioner's speech at the launch of the African Science Academy

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a pleasure to be with you today to mark the official launch of the African Science Academy in Ghana.

Every single person here has, in some way, contributed to the success of this moment. I think you will agree with me when I say that the young women of the African Science Academy (ASA) are simply brilliant. They are intelligent, articulate, and passionate about the development of their continent. I cannot wait to see what they go on to achieve; and how they inspire other young women to achieve similar things through their example.

I first heard about plans to create the African Science Academy when I met Dr. Tom Ilube in 2015. Tom was visiting as part of a delegation with the Lord Mayor of London. I was struck by his vision and determination to launch Africa's first STEM school for girls. I was equally impressed to learn how quickly his ambitious idea became a reality. Last year, Tom was named the most influential black British person, largely due to his work in education and philanthropy. This exceptional school exists because of his imagination and impressive resolve.

You can feel that something special is happening here. To the pioneering 24 girls of ASA, you must be so very proud of yourselves. All of you took a leap of faith when you decided to join a brand-new school, particularly those who moved countries to do so, perhaps leaving home for the first time. From your academic excellence to your outstanding confidence, you are all role-models. Role models for your siblings, your peers, and for the millions of young girls across the continent who fight for their right for a quality education. ASA students – you are also the future. You have shown yourself to be ambassadors for girls studying science. You are the future engineers, computer scientists, professors and astronauts of this exciting continent. And you are part of the future in reducing machoism, misogyny, discrimination and prejudice against women – that is, by men against women.

To develop, African leaders need to prioritise and invest in a strong educational infrastructure. Africa has the youngest population in the world, with over 200 million people aged between 15 to 24. We need our young people to be equipped with skills relevant to the technological era. It is the youth who will develop the solutions to the development issues of our countries. From climate change to agriculture; from software development to finding life-changing cures – a knowledge of technology and the sciences is crucial.

Next week, the United Nations will celebrate the International Day of Women and Girls in Science to promote female inclusion and participation in the sciences. Internationally, there is a strong gender imbalance in the STEM fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Girls and women

continue to face unique and significant barriers in accessing STEM education, such as gendered discrimination and lack of encouragement. ASA aims to bridge this gap in Africa by providing gifted girls with access to new opportunities and an excellent pre-university education. ASA is leading the way in its efforts to prepare girls to compete and achieve in a male-dominated world. And that is the key – no country, no society can ever hope to develop fully or to realise all its potential if it systemically discriminates against half of its population.

Indeed, we know that women and girls typically make up just over half of most national populations, including here on the African continent. Improving the lives of girls and women is also a key priority for the UK government. In 2016, the UK Department for International Development launched a new initiative: Leave No Girl Behind, to deliver quality education to disadvantaged girls. We believe that access to a good education, in a safe environment, significantly improves the life chances of girls.

Through DFID, right here in Ghana, we have a Complementary Basic Education programme designed to help children who have dropped out of, or who never enrolled in, primary school to have a second chance at gaining those vital literacy and numeracy skills. So far, that programme has enabled over 150,000 children, half of them girls, to have a second chance at education; and well over 90% of those have both completed that programme and transferred back into mainstream education.

A second DFID Ghana programme is called Girls' Participatory Approaches to Student Access or G-PASS which addresses the household economic challenge, particularly in Ghana's poorest northern regions, of putting girls through secondary school, by providing an incentive and scholarship package for vulnerable girls in the 75 most deprived districts of Ghana, while helping Colleges of Education to improve the quality of teaching they receive. So far, over 87,000 girls have received such scholarship packages, with over 70,000 of them completing Junior High School and over 16,000 Senior High School, representing a significant cadre of educated girls and young women in this country's most disadvantaged areas.

We are proud of that work, and proud, too, to see private initiatives like ASA bear fruit. We are happy to be a supporter of ASA and the brilliant work that is happening here. Proud that Ghana is the country where this wonderful project is located. And proud that ASA students are completing the gold-standard Cambridge International A-Levels, representing the potential of British qualifications to stretch the minds of Africa's best and brightest.

ASA was built by an incredible team, and so much hard work has gone into making it a success. I would like to take this opportunity to encourage companies and individuals to support the development of ASA, whether financially or through in-kind support. We all want to see ASA grow from strength to strength. With your help, ASA can build a large 21st century campus and offer scholarships to hundreds of bright girls who might benefit from this opportunity. Such feats do not happen by magic. It requires the power of people and the collaboration of partners invested in girls' education and Africa at large.

I would also encourage ASA to share its experience with other schools and educational organisations. You are doing things differently and nurturing a new generation of empowered young women. Share your stories with others. Inspire other schools to encourage girls to pursue subjects like physics and computing. Amplify the voices of your students, who will be the change-makers of tomorrow. We want to hear their voice.

Thank you again for inviting me as guest of honour to this special occasion. Congratulations to the Founder, Dr Tom Ilube; Headteacher, Ms Efua Adabie; the staff and students at ASA; and all of ASA's committed supporters. In a few years, ASA will have a strong alumni network of hundreds of young women who will be leaders in their fields of expertise. Good luck to you all on this ambitious and worthy endeavour.