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Knowledge Platforms & Learning Systems

**Collaborative University Platforms for Urban Change:
Lessons from the Education Collaborative**

The Education Collaborative illustrates how universities can move from fragmented activity to coordinated collective action. Through regional hubs, peer learning and shared diagnostic tools, the network has enabled African universities to strengthen institutional capacity and graduate outcomes at scale, offering lessons for collaborative approaches to urban knowledge and skills development.



Meeting of members, January 2026. *The Education Collaborative*

1. Executive Summary

Many universities operate in silos rather than collaboratively, limiting their collective ability to influence the workforce and institutional systems that rapidly growing cities require. The Education Collaborative, a network of higher education institutions (HEIs) committed to improving student outcomes across Africa through shared learning and co-creation, provides a tested example of how universities can move from fragmented activity to organised and sustained collective action.

Founded in 2017 and anchored by Ashesi University in Ghana, the Education Collaborative¹ has grown from a single convening of nine institutions into a network engaging more than 490 universities across Sub-Saharan Africa, with 57 formal members. Its model combines decentralised regional hubs, peer learning, shared benchmarking tools and philanthropic partnerships designed to strengthen institutional capacity rather than fund individual projects. The network aims to transform the outcomes of more than 1.1 million students by 2030, equipping them to become ethical, entrepreneurial leaders capable of shaping industries, creating jobs and contributing to economic development.

The Collaborative's experience is instructive in contexts where institutions must work together to respond to complex development challenges. Many Commonwealth cities face parallel pressures: rapid urbanisation, growing housing deficits, under-resourced local governments and fragmented professional training systems. Universities across the Commonwealth are often engaged in relevant fields such as architecture, planning, engineering and development finance, but tend to operate independently and at limited scale.

The Education Collaborative demonstrates that structured inter-university learning, shared accountability tools and thematic collaboration can shift institutional behaviour across large networks. Its experience offers useful insights into how universities can organise collectively to strengthen institutional capacity and align education systems more closely with societal needs.

¹ The Education Collaborative: <https://educationcollab.ashesi.edu.gh/>

2. Context and Challenge

Cities are growing faster than the institutions responsible for managing them. According to the Commonwealth Association of Architects² (CAA), urban populations across Commonwealth countries are expected to double by 2050, rising from one billion to two billion people. The fastest growth is occurring in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where institutional capacity is often most constrained.

This rapid urbanisation intensifies pressures on housing systems, infrastructure provision, climate-resilient planning and urban service delivery. Addressing these challenges requires not only new investment but also a workforce equipped with the skills needed to design, finance and manage urban development.

Universities play a central role in preparing this workforce. However, institutions engaged in urban-related disciplines frequently operate within national or institutional silos. Opportunities for cross-border peer learning, shared curriculum development and collective engagement with governments and cities are often limited. As a result, promising innovations developed by individual universities rarely scale, and educational programmes may diverge from the needs of practitioners and policymakers.

Before the establishment of the Education Collaborative, African universities faced similar constraints. Individual institutions were working to improve student outcomes and strengthen teaching and leadership, but their efforts remained fragmented and limited in reach. Recognising the potential benefits of collaboration, Ashesi University initiated a network designed to enable universities to share knowledge, test innovations and support one another in institutional reform.

The resulting platform demonstrates how structured collaboration between universities can help overcome institutional isolation and enable collective responses to shared challenges.

² CAA Survey of the Built Environment Professions across the Commonwealth:
<https://commonwealtharchitects.org/initiatives/survey-of-the-built-environment-professions-in-the-commonwealth/>

3. Experience

The Education Collaborative began with a single convening hosted by Ashesi University, bringing together leaders from nine African universities to exchange experience on teaching practices, student outcomes and institutional management. This initial meeting evolved into an annual gathering supplemented by year-round learning sessions, peer mentoring and collaborative problem-solving.

The Collaborative operates through a decentralised governance structure. Strategic leadership is provided by an Executive Director based at the secretariat at Ashesi University. Three regional hubs covering East, West and Southern Africa coordinate activity across the network. Each hub is led by a Hub Director or Assistant Director responsible for convening institutions, coordinating regional activities and supporting collaboration among members.

The hub system distributes leadership across multiple regions and institutions, helping ensure that activities remain relevant to different contexts while maintaining a shared strategic direction. Strategic Committees composed of Vice-Chancellors or senior institutional representatives provide oversight, while Technical Committees coordinate programme implementation across member institutions.

The Education Collaborative organises its work around four focal areas: Ethics and Leadership, Entrepreneurship, Career and Employability, and Faculty Development and Research. Each focal area is supported by a Community of Practice that connects participating universities with external stakeholders, including employers, researchers and policy actors.

Within each thematic area, institutions that demonstrate effective practice often take the lead in piloting innovations, documenting lessons and mentoring peers. This rotating leadership model encourages institutions to contribute actively to the network and ensures that influence derives from demonstrated experience rather than institutional prestige.

Members also collaborate to develop shared diagnostic and assessment tools. One example is the Entrepreneurship Ecosystem Diagnostic Tool, which enables universities to assess their own institutional capacity to support student entrepreneurship. The tool provides structured insights into institutional strengths and gaps while enabling universities to benchmark their performance and learn from peers.

A defining feature of the Collaborative is its emphasis on creating conditions in which institutions feel able to discuss challenges openly. By encouraging transparency and peer support, the network fosters a culture of shared learning rather than competition. Evaluations reported in the Education Collaborative's 2025 Impact Stories³ publication found that approximately 80 percent of member institutions implemented changes to their practices based on lessons learned from peers.

The Collaborative has also benefited from early philanthropic support from the Mastercard Foundation. This funding allowed the network to develop its governance structures, diagnostic tools and convening platforms over a multi-year period. Importantly, resources were directed toward strengthening collaboration and institutional capacity rather than financing isolated projects.

³ Education Collaborative 2025 Impact Stories: <https://educationcollab.ashesi.edu.gh/impact-stories-publication-issue-2/>

4. Insights and Lessons

The Education Collaborative demonstrates that carefully designed coordination platforms can shift institutional behaviour across large networks without requiring strong central authority or large-scale programme funding. Instead, change emerges through peer learning, shared tools and distributed leadership.

The Collaborative's regional hub structure is particularly important in enabling the network to operate across diverse institutional environments. By locating leadership within different regions, the network maintains contextual relevance while supporting collective learning across countries.

Shared diagnostic tools play a central role in sustaining engagement. By providing structured mechanisms for institutions to assess their own performance and compare results with peers, these tools encourage transparency and continuous improvement. They also reinforce the network's role as a platform for collaborative learning rather than competition.

The practice of rotating leadership among institutions that pilot innovations further strengthens the network's dynamics. This approach ensures that expertise and influence circulate across the network while encouraging institutions to experiment and share lessons.

Another critical feature is the emphasis placed on building trust among participating institutions. Creating environments in which universities feel able to share challenges and failures encourages genuine learning and sustained collaboration.

Finally, the Education Collaborative illustrates how catalytic investment can support system-wide change. Early philanthropic support enabled the network to establish its collaborative infrastructure and learning platforms. By directing resources toward institutional collaboration rather than individual projects, the initiative helped create an ecosystem in which multiple institutions could innovate and learn together.

5. Key Takeaways

- Collaborative networks anchored by trusted institutions can mobilise large numbers of universities around shared objectives while preserving institutional autonomy.
- Regional hub structures help balance coordination with contextual relevance, distributing ownership and leadership across diverse geographies.
- Shared diagnostic and benchmarking tools can encourage peer learning and support institutional change across participating organisations.
- Catalytic funding directed toward strengthening collaboration between institutions can generate broader system change than funding isolated projects.
- Sustaining engagement within collaborative networks requires creating environments where institutions feel able to share challenges, learn from failure and support one another.

This Case Study was prepared by Dr Isaac Akinwumi, Associate Professor in the Department of Civil Engineering at Covenant University, by way of contribution to the work of the Commonwealth Sustainable Cities Coalition, March 2026.



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