

## **'Everybody wants to wear a suit!'**

It is about thirty-eight degrees outside and I am on the back of my colleagues' motorcycle. We drive along a red, dusty road bypassing big trucks and other motorcycles. Children along the road wave and shout at us, they are surprised and excited about my appearance, riding the back of a motorcycle in their town. Our destination, Savelugu, is a small town located 25 kilometres north of Tamale, in Northern Ghana. My colleague and I are visiting Savelugu Vocational School to talk with students and teachers about their experiences and dreams.

### **Unemployed Academics**

I am in Ghana to do research for my master's thesis, in collaboration with Edukans. My research focuses on students in vocational education: schools that train people for jobs like dressmakers, cooks, carpenters or mechanics. After Junior High School, students in Ghana can choose to continue to Senior High (SHS) as a preparation for university, or go to vocational high school. This last type of education is especially important in Ghana since youth unemployment is very high. Ghanaians with an academic degree are sitting at home, because they can't find a job in the field they are educated in.

### **Eager to contribute**

Once we arrive at the school, the students greet us with a big smile and guide us to the entrance. The school has five departments: fashion, catering, electrical engineering, painting and secretarial work. We see the fashion students sewing colourful fabric on their hand-driven sewing machines. The classrooms look old and dusty but the students seem ambitious and excited. I get a tour around the school and talk with a few students. They tell me how they hope to start their own business, earn money and contribute to their families in the villages.

### **Low Prestige**

In Ghanaian society, vocational education is struggling with a reputation of low prestige; it is seen as an education system for students that are less intelligent, or don't want to pursue a successful career. A seventeen-year-old girl in Senior High, aspiring to go to university and become a journalist said about her peers in vocational education:

*'I think vocational school is meant for those who are not doing well in the reading aspects, or in the academic aspects. That is what we know about vocational school [...]. Everybody wants to wear a suit!'*

She was referring to Ghanaians' ambition to be successful and the bad image that vocational education has in Ghana.

Despite its poor reputation, I have spoken to many students who are very proud of their vocational education, who consciously chose to study for a skilled profession that improves their chance to find a fitting job. Johanna, an ambitious fashion student, tells me:

*'Most of our parents are not educated, so they don't know the importance of education. My dad told me to go to SHS [senior high school, pre-university]. I told him: frankly, I want to have a skill, I want to be a skillful person. And then he agreed. I think there is no way he will stop me.'*

Johanna wants to continue her education in fashion, and she wants to open a tailor shop in the town she grew up in to support her family.

### **Edukans**

All in all, my research for Edukans was a great experience for me. It has been inspiring to talk to these ambitious students, and I think Edukans' work, to stimulate vocational education in this area, is very important. It helps to improve the future possibilities of these students. I have seen how vocational

education is very valuable in Northern-Ghanaian society and has the potential to employ young determined students. The image of low prestige that it has is slowly disappearing. But it would help to raise awareness especially among young Ghanaians so they can see the value of vocational education within the unemployment issue.