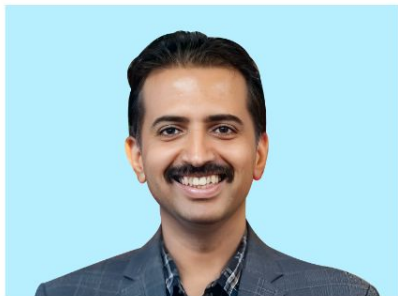# International ACAC

Sub-Saharan Africa Regional Institute

Session on:
Designing for Inclusion: Rethinking University
Applications Through an African Lens

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Session framing

What is designed determines who can enter and who is left out.

Drawing from John Cary's TEDx titled "**How architecture can create dignity for all**", this session builds **on the idea that bathroom design exposes gender bias as a metaphor for how admissions systems can unintentionally exclude applicants.**

Why this matters

African students, like many other populations globally, face layered barriers which include:

Limited information

Weak purchasing power

Low internet access

Scarcity of trained counsellors

These barriers, amongst others, make applying to university abroad costly, risky, and uncertain.

Structural barriers

Complex multi-stage platforms

Reliance on unavailable standardised tests

Translation and document challenges

Hidden costs and unclear fees

Limited contextual understanding

Low transparency

Minimal local outreach

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Who gets left out:

Case studies from counsellors

Quotes from John Cary's Ted Talk:

"Design was misaligned to the moment that [we] were experiencing. The messaging in this is: 1. You are not at home, you are in a foreign place. 2. You are not in control of anything. 3. Your comfort simply is secondary."

- **"At best (bad design) is uninspiring, at worst undignified."**
    - The design of the university application and application process is to fit the diversity of the world, the diversity of Africa, the diversity of Ghana, the diversity of Accra , the diversity of individual experiences in to a form.

    - We are asking children to do this. Children with developing executive functioning skills and organizational skills. Children who don't have all of the background and history tied to their experience.

Who gets left out:

Case studies from counsellors

Another look…..

""At best (bad design) is uninspiring, at worst undignified."

  Uninspiring to undignified, a spectrum of experiences

-   ○ IB courses student & Europe
-   ○ Families wealth is communal wealth, or held in ~~"non-traditional"~~ "non-western" currency
-   ○ Date and naming conventions (yes, there are 13 months. Surname vs fathers name)
-   ○ Chelsea's Story

Audience survey

One admissions policy change you'd make?

Which institutional metric should shift?

What next steps can be taken in 12 months?

Inclusive design principles

Simplicity and transparency

Contextual assessment
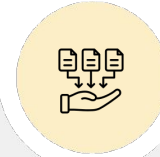
Affordability

Partnerships with local counsellors

Digital accessibility

Data-informed change

Learning from past initiatives

Recruiting the First African Scholars for Ashoka University, India

❖ **Ashoka University** — a highly selective liberal arts institution based in Delhi, India — is renowned for its **interdisciplinary education** and **need-based full financial aid**, ensuring access for talented students from underprivileged backgrounds.

❖ Between **2015 and 2018**, I **headed the International Scholars Outreach Program** at Ashoka, leading initiatives to **identify, engage, and enroll exceptional students** from across the globe.

❖ The role involved **building strategic partnerships** with schools, educators, and scholarship foundations to strengthen Ashoka's international academic footprint.

❖ Spearheaded outreach efforts that **expanded diversity and inclusion** within Ashoka's student community while showcasing India's emerging liberal arts movement to the world.
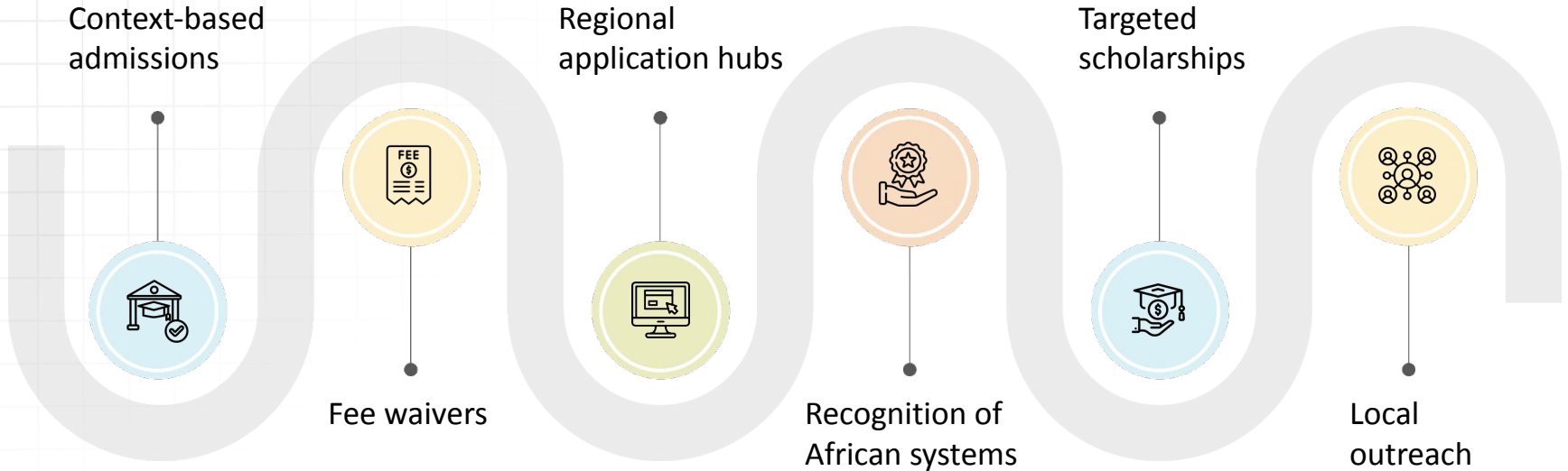
Training for application readers

- Being intentional about teaching the nuances of national curricula

- Continued discussion and expansion of extra/co-curricular activities and their role in the review process

- Context, context, context

Institutional initiatives

Context-based
admissions

Regional
application hubs

Targeted
scholarships

Fee waivers

Recognition of
African systems

Local
outreach

Panel questions

- What is one effective initiative your institution has implemented to improve access and opportunities for African applicants?

- What steps can universities and partners take to reduce the cost barriers that limit African students' ability to apply or enroll?

- At what stages of the application or enrollment process do students tend to drop off, and why?

- How can universities better interpret and evaluate local grading systems and academic records from African secondary schools?

- What are the biggest administrative or procedural frictions African applicants face, and how might these be addressed?

- How does your institution consider applicants' local educational and socioeconomic context in admissions decisions?

- What has been your institution's experience with local or regional partnerships in Africa, and what lessons have you learned from them?

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Closing remarks