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Fertile field for schools

By David Furlonger and James Eedes

Eon Smit, chairman of the SA Business Schools Association, puts the business education challenge facing Africa in a nutshell: "India and China have a thousand or more business schools each. In the whole of Africa, you can almost count the total on your fingers and toes."

Until a few years ago, no-one much cared. Those few talented young Africans who were identified generally attended business schools in the US and Europe. Only SA appeared to take business education seriously. Even today, this country accounts for about half the continent's reputable schools.

However, growing demand for business education across Africa is forcing a rethink of resources. Multinationals with operations in African countries have - sometimes under duress - recognised local management potential and the need to nurture it. Growing local economies have also increased demand from local businesses anxious to learn the skills they need in a mercilessly competitive world.

Among the main beneficiaries of this growth are SA schools, some of which provide custom-made business education programmes for companies in many African countries - and even for overseas-based multinationals. As Smit notes: "The training they used to get in Europe and the US, they can now get here and at a fraction of the price. They can send five here for the price of one in the UK."

Of course, you don't get the business if you can't guarantee the quality. SA schools' stock has been rising steadily in recent years. Three local schools - Stellenbosch University Business School, Wits Business School and Pretoria University's Gordon Institute of Business Science (Gibs) - all featured in the latest *Financial Times* Top 50 international rankings of executive education. They weren't alone: Nigeria's Lagos Business School was also there. It was the first time four African business schools have made the lists. Though not on this ranking, Cape Town University's Graduate School of Business is highly rated by the *FT* for its master of business administration (MBA) programme.

All five of these institutions are members of the Association of African Business Schools, which exists to raise standards among African schools. The association was created with support from the International Finance Corp, as part of its aim to increase African management capacity. The association has 15 member schools, of which six are South African. Other countries represented are Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana and Senegal.

Gibs director Nick Binedell, who chairs the association, says it sets strict criteria for membership and that a number of schools, including some from SA, have failed to win accreditation. Immediate twin aims are to further improve the quality of existing members but also to "broaden the network" by eventually admitting new members.

Schools can't meet Africa's management needs on their own, he says. Many of the continent's business schools operate without support or encouragement from governments in their own countries. Yet it is in those governments' own interests to do so. The more

business skills can be created, the more economies will grow. "Ministries of education need to encourage the growth of business education," says Binedell.

Sam Jonah, the Ghanaian-born former president of AngloGold Ashanti and a visiting professor at Wits Business School, agrees. Africans are desperate for business skills and knowledge. And he's not just talking about those employed by corporations. In Ghana, for example, private business education institutions are springing up everywhere. Some are of questionable quality but they all meet a need.

It's not just SA's "Ivy League" schools attracting continental interest. Kobus Jonker, of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University's business school in Port Elizabeth, reports a growing number of African students attending his courses. Other smaller schools tell a similar story.

SA is still seen as the mecca for business education. But is that healthy in the longer term?

Perhaps Lagos Business School can help break that trend. Nigeria is desperate for business education. Godfrey Igboin, who works in the nation's oil sector, says: "People are getting more entrepreneurial and starting their own businesses, so they want an education in general business principles. There is a large influx of foreign-trained Nigerians coming back to the country, and many have a master's degree. A first degree doesn't cut it any more if you want to go places."

He adds that the school, which attracts more than 2 000 students each year from multinational and local companies, is highly regarded in Nigeria. It opened in 1990 and received full academic accreditation in 2002 from the federal government to become the first school of the Pan-African University, permitting it to launch degree programmes in business administration. It began offering a part-time executive MBA in 2002 and a full-time MBA the following year.

Lagos-born businessman Otome Oyo says the school's alumni association has a growing membership spread across Nigeria and beyond. In a country where who you know matters as much as what you know, this is important.