

African schools seek new ideas

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When the business school industry discusses the exciting topics of the moment, developments in Asia – particularly China and India – are top of the list. Few pundits are focusing on Africa, but they would be unwise to overlook it.

“Economically we are the lost continent,” says Juan Elegido, dean of the Lagos Business School in Nigeria. But he and others like him are planning to change that. Like many of his peers in African business schools he sees it as part of his mission to bring economic stability and growth to the country he represents.

Mike Ward, director of the graduate school of management at the University of Pretoria clearly speaks for many of his peers when he says: “There are 800m people on a continent that really needs uplifting and we are being looked to for help.”

The “we” in question are Africa’s top business schools, the deans and senior faculty from some 10 of which landed in London last week to begin a fourteen-day tour of a handful of the world’s top business schools. Sitting around a dining table at London Business School on their first day, the professors have clear aims for what they hope to achieve from their tour.

“We want to see the best practice in business schools, and see the range of different business schools,” says Jonathan Cook, director for academic programmes at the Gordon Institute of Business Science at the University of Pretoria.

For Prof Ward it is a case of prioritisation. “We want to get clues from leading business schools about what we should be focusing on. Should we focus on good students, should relationships [with industry] be important? Research? Faculty? What makes a good business school?”

Scratch the surface and it is clear that the problems these schools face are remarkably similar to those at any European or US school. One of the biggest pressures is how to recruit appropriately trained faculty and how to attract visiting faculty from outside Africa. The Association of African Business Schools, to which all the schools belong and which organised the trip with funding from the International Finance Corporation, part of the World Bank group, is in the process of setting up a database to list all the faculty at non-African business schools who might have an interest in returning there to teach.

Money is also a big issue. Not one of the schools has an endowment and many of the schools have to earn all their income through course fees because they are private and have no government funding. Even where there is government participation, funds are squeezed. At the University of Nairobi, for example, which has undergraduate, graduate and PhD programmes, John Kenduiwo, dean of the school of business, says: “We have been told to look outside for additional funding.”

The need to help African business is clearly a pressing one. “The private sector is growing fast, for example, in banking,” says Marcellina Mvula Chijoriga, who as well as being dean of the faculty of commerce and management at the University of Dar es Salaam chairs the Tanzania Revenue Authority, Tanzania’s tax collecting agency.

Yet many of the business schools are mere infants by US standards. The African Institute of Management and the International School of Management were both set up in Dakar, Senegal, in the 1990s; the Lagos Business School was set up in 1991. The faculty of commerce at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, in Nairobi, Kenya, was launched as recently as 2003.

Nonetheless, the schools are moving quickly. They are beginning to eschew professor-centric university lecturing for more interactive types of teaching, with student participation, such as the case method.

Indeed, the schools have instigated case teaching workshops in Africa, to help train professors. Mamadou Gaye, director of the doctoral school at the African Institute of Management in Senegal, says his school has now written six locally related case studies.

The deans have clearly been pushing against open doors at the top business schools. As well as LBS, the itinerary includes visits to the Saïd Business School at the University of Oxford, Insead and HEC Paris in France and Harvard Business School, NYU Stern and Columbia in the US.

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