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Knowledge sharing key to Africa's growth

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In today's world of global business, leaders need to be equipped with the tools to make tough decisions on a regular basis. While many businessmen and women have taken courses as part of their undergraduate studies that could help them address questions similar to those posed in the above examples, such as business strategy, human resources management, entrepreneurship, corporate governance, international business and the like, being lectured on a subject doesn't always teach graduates how to make real-life business decisions.

Business schools have helped fill this gap, giving businessmen and women a more practical business education. The above examples are actual case studies that have been compiled by business schools in Africa and in the US. The case-method of teaching, originated by the Harvard Business School, enables students to learn by group discussion of actual events. Today all good graduate business schools use the case method as the main form of teaching.

Business schools across the continent have begun working together to build up a database of African case studies in a bid to strengthen the voice of African business in their teachings and to make business education more relevant to doing business on the continent. This sharing of information between the schools has now been further cemented through the formation of the Association of African Business Schools (AABS) last year, an initiative to build a network between African business schools and share best practice in a bid to address the needs of business education at a postgraduate level in Africa.

The formal instatement of the association in Lagos in October 2005 was a culmination of an 18-month dialogue between business schools facilitated by the Global Business School Network (GBSN). The GBSN, which is funded by the International Finance Corporation, aims to enhance the institutional capacity of business schools in emerging markets so that they can provide a stronger pool of management talent to local, regional and multinational firms and organisations. During the 18-month period a series of workshops were held to think through the needs of the business education at a postgraduate level in Africa.

Business School associations do exist at a local and regional level in Africa but this is the first initiative to bring business schools from across the continent together. With increased inter-Africa trade, and the resulting increased movement of goods, services and investment across African borders, together with the growing realisation by African governments of the role played by the private sector in economic development, it makes sense now than ever before to form a continent-wide association to share best practice. A governing body, comprising five representatives from business schools in five different countries across Africa, was elected to the board at the Lagos meeting for a two-year period. Professor Nick Binedell, founding director and Sasol Chair of Strategic Management at the Gordon Institute of Business Science in South Africa was elected as chair.

"Our reasoning around the establishment of the association is obvious – it is to strengthen the quality of our business schools, to coordinate our activities, to share our ideas and practices and to engage with universities and ministries of education about the importance of business schools," observes Binedell. "The core issue is that if Africa is going to achieve its growth goals, it is going to need highly qualified managers from all sectors – the private, public and NGO sector. We believe that business schools can be a vital but small part of generating the kinds of skills that leaders of institutions are going to need," he explains.

"There was an urgent need for African business schools to get together and harmonise the work we are doing and to share our case studies, business models and teaching methodologies with one another," explains Idrissa Mbengue, a member of the governing board and Director of the International MBA, Insitut Superieur Management (ISM), Dakar, Senegal. "For ISM, we see the opportunity to benchmark what we are doing with other African business schools as one of the most important benefits of forming such an association," he comments.

Erasmus Kajjage, member of the governing board and dean in the faculty of Commerce and Management at the University of Dar es Salaam says that one of the major benefits of the association will be the pooling of resources on the continent. "We have excellent education resources in Africa but up until now these resources have not been coordinated and we have had little information as to who is doing what where. As a result we have sent people to the US and Europe to get the necessary training when in fact we have those resources available here in Africa."

According to Binedell, the business school system in Africa is, relative to other continents, underdeveloped. "There are a number of outstanding institutions but there is much more to be done. Most countries will benefit significantly from strengthening their business schools," he points out.

While the leading business schools in the world are still in the US and Europe, very few Africans have the opportunity to attend these schools. African business schools are important as it exposes business leaders to the issues they are going to have to deal with. "All business schools around the world are significantly influenced by the American model of an MBA (Masters in Business Administration) and have borrowed from their experience and ethos. But all around the world schools are seeking to contextualise and localise for business conditions they actually face," remarks Binedell.

"In the African context, this means doing business on a continent which has a huge development challenge, that needs to focus on economic growth, on creating viable markets and on the quality of public policy. The continent is clearly resource based and much of the business activity is multinational. There is a huge need to develop both the SME sector and the large scale corporations that come out of this continent," he continues.

Kaijage echoes these sentiments, "We need to provide education that is relevant to the economic conditions of Africa. Until now most of our case studies and books have come from Europe and the US and are not as relevant as they should be. Aside from sharing existing case studies with each other, African business schools need to form closer relationships with the private sector in order to build up more local research."

The association is currently in the process of inviting members to apply and intends to have its membership finalised by the middle of this year. Institutions will have to meet certain criteria in order to be granted membership status, such as having a certain number of staff, minimum tuition fees and a specified amount of African-orientated research output. The association is also inviting faculties from African business schools to subject matter workshops, which includes training on what to do teach and how to teach it. An African wide database of business schools and faculties is in the process of being established, along with the African wide database of case studies.

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