

Insights MBAs

Schools 'must stay relevant'

Academia plays a vital role in identifying and solving contemporary problems

IT WAS inevitable that as society pondered the role of business following the global financial crisis, fingers would be pointed at business schools, particularly those that had narrowed their focus from managerialism to satisfying corporate demand for the accretion of financial resources, says Prof Nicola Kleyn, deputy dean at Pretoria University's Gordon Institute of Business Science (Gibs).

Calls have been made to business schools to advance the curriculums of their Master of Business Administration (MBA) on a range of themes including ethics, stakeholder capitalism, international business, responsible and culturally sensitive leadership, sustainable growth and entrepreneurship. Business schools are being asked to develop programmes that would create managerial talent able to incubate, grow, manage and lead organisations that accelerate economic growth in a socially responsible manner.

Accompanying such calls have been questions and comments around the role played by business schools, their research agendas and the MBA degree in particular.

"Undeniably some (mainly US) schools developed their MBA programmes to deepen expertise in finance to feed the

demand for top jobs at managing consultancies and merchant banks," says Kleyn.

"(That is) assuming, however, that all business schools have abandoned themes such as ethics, entrepreneurship and leadership. Such a view ignores the instrumental role played by schools in enabling scores of functional managers to obtain the knowledge, skills and attributes to grow their careers and to lead organisations. Internationally, universities such as Michigan, Babson and Stanford have a sterling reputation of birthing entrepreneurs with the capabilities and networks needed to grow and scale new enterprises," she says.

The growing demands by universities on all faculties to increase academic research output has also resulted in criticism that business has lost touch with industry.

"But," says Kleyn, "before declaring sides on the battle of rigour versus relevance, perhaps it is time to look for the middle road that bridges the two. Kurt Lewin's much quoted saying that 'there's nothing so practical as a good theory' hints at the important role that academia can play in identifying and solving contemporary problems. "The issue is less about

whether business schools should conduct academic research and more about what type of research is needed. The debates about whether theory leads practice or practice leads theory is outdated and unhelpful. Business schools need to work with industry to co-define critical leadership and management problems as well as lead research agendas (in collaboration with other faculties and schools) that contribute to solving the issues du jour."

Gibs's Centre for Business Analysis and Research offers a variety of programmes and initiatives, the centre says in its overview. It has been created to nurture collaboration and identify critical synergies among various programmes and initiatives undertaken at Gibs. The full weight of Gibs's renowned faculty and academic networks are brought to bear on delivering pertinent academic programmes and building a central core of knowledge and research to support business, it says.

Over the past few years Gibs has initiated a number of programmes at the centre, the purposes of which are to bring to the fore the most critical and pressing issues facing businesses in developing countries. The programmes extend and deepen the content of Gibs's academic core and facilitate the school's interactions with society and the business context.



Nicola Kleyn ... middle road.

The centre also seeks to contribute to the internationalisation of Gibs's perspectives and networks, promote the Gibs brand in the field of management education and to position it as a leading expert on South African-focused management research.

These programmes take a variety of forms – academic and practical – and are led by experts who wish to make a contribution to research, global best practice and share this knowledge with South African businesses to enhance competitiveness. Gibs has attracted support and funding for many initiatives and works in close collaboration with these partners to develop general management.

Gibs describes itself as philosophically and literally "close to business" (the campus

is in Sandton) and maintains close relationships with most of SA's leading corporations. Its mission is to "significantly improve individual and organisational performance, and curriculums are designed in close consultation with and with reference to business".

Kleyn says SA has a proud tradition of strong business schools. "The first MBA offered outside of North America was launched by the University of Pretoria in 1949. Since then, the top South African business schools have produced graduates who have gone on to make significant contributions in a range of sectors, industries and countries and well beyond merchant banking and management consulting.

"The need to continuously ensure that MBA curriculums enable graduates to successfully lead and manage in today's complex business environment is a given. This, however, is not the only output that business schools need to generate. Knowledge creation that assists organisations to solve management and leadership challenges across varying business environments is essential," says Kleyn.

The issue is not whether future managers and leaders need a place to learn, the issue is how business schools adapt their teaching and research to ensure that they create value for both current and future generations of business leaders, she adds.

Move to raise MBA standard

THE South African Business Schools Association (Sabsa) believes that the discourse about business education needs to be shifted away from a somewhat negative, stereotyped view that prevails to an acknowledgement that the country is blessed with world-class business schools which are making a profound contribution, says Sabsa president Prof Owen Skae.

Reacting to criticism of business schools that Master of Business Administration graduates may be considered to be competent scientists, but that they are often not the competent management professionals demanded by the world of work, Skae rejects the notion the MBA has an overt focus on the "hard" science as opposed to "soft" issues as unsubstantiated. "Somehow the challenges in

business (or lack of resolution thereof) are once again laid on the doorstep of business schools.

"Further, we need to find ways to get more managers educated and trained and that the business schools are standing by to do just that. However, engagement with the public sector is problematic and for many companies in SA they are not prepared to make the necessary investment despite the abundance of funds that actually does exist," Skae says.

Sabsa represents 18 business schools from across the country.

The association has recently put forward a proposal to the Council for Higher Education that would see member schools implementing higher entry requirements for the MBA. The member schools have unanimously accepted the proposal to set a standard for the MBA that

brings the South African MBA in line with the world norm and positions South African MBA graduates as equal to top international MBA graduates.

According to the proposal Sabsa members will work towards implementing minimum admission requirements for the MBA qualification that include a four-year bachelor's degree, or a post-graduate diploma (Business Administration) at Level 8, or an applicable Honours degree; or recognition of prior learning plus any additional admission requirements set by the individual business school.

This will enhance formal entry requirements which now include a combination of an undergraduate degree, work experience – in particular at management level – and selection tests.

More than just advancing careers

THE Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree is probably the most recognised postgraduate qualification globally, in great part because of the opportunities it creates in career advancement for successful candidates.

MastersPortal, a postgraduate course search engine which reviews more than 23,000 programmes from more than 1,400 institutions worldwide, ranks a higher income, career opportunities, networking and knowledge and skills acquisition – in that order – as the "five good reasons" for studying for an MBA degree. Nowhere, however, does it explain how an MBA will benefit teams and organisations and the return on investment it will yield for employers.

In SA, as a society in the process of transformation, Rhodes Business School recognises the broader societal needs that can be tackled with more and better trained managers in the workplace. In its overview, the business school emphasises two issues that are key to its approach to business education: diversity and sustainability.

It points out that most of its students and graduates are black and female, with women

comprising 41% of the student population.

"This is in line with Rhodes University's emphasis on growing the skills of all South Africans and on growing the next generation of black and women postgraduates and academics at Rhodes and for SA."

The diversity among MBA students reaches beyond race to career, nationality, origin and culture. "Students include medical doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, engineers, managers and administrators from the public sector, entrepreneurs etc.

"The South African students are from across the socioeconomic spectrum, while the international students are from a growing number of countries in Africa and the rest of the world. Rhodes Business School will increasingly be targeting students from BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and SA) who wish to attend a leading, English-speaking business school with a strong scholarly foundation in the southern hemisphere."

The school's approach to sustainability takes cognisance of the necessity to "meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs".

"In all its courses, both short courses and the MBA, Rhodes Business School emphasises the balance which needs to be placed on the social, environmental and economic performance of organisations which is essential to their successful long-term operation. As a result of the concerns with global warming, for example, there is a risk that public policies and social movements will speed up the demands for companies and other organisations to operate in a more sustainable way," it says.

Chuka Onaga, a Nigerian medical doctor and Rhodes MBA graduate, says when he started his MBA at Rhodes Business School, he dismissed the whole concept of sustainability as tree hugging.

"Sustainability determines not only the profitability but also the survival of your business. I wanted to do a formal degree in management to increase my knowledge base and my financial and management skills," says Onaga, who says he chose Rhodes Business School because of its modular MBA.

With five MBA programme formats to choose from, the Gordon Institute of Business Science offers prospective students the widest range of options in the country.

Delivered by a world-class faculty, the internationally-accredited GIBS MBA is aimed at developing well-rounded and effective general managers and entrepreneurs who can operate in any developed or dynamic market context.

As the business school that is close to business, our custom-built campus in Illovo, Johannesburg gives you the opportunity to learn and develop, personally and professionally, in the heart of South Africa's economic hub.

Whether you choose our full-time MBA, which offers both General Management and Entrepreneurship tracks, or the Financial Times-ranked part-time, modular block release or long-block modular MBA in General Management, you will gain the competitive edge in the short-term application of relevant knowledge, which has long-term strategic value for your career as a business leader.

gibs.co.za/mba

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