



# **Amplifying the impact of African business schools**

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# Impact:

**The ability to have  
a marked effect  
or influence  
on a situation,  
a person or a process.**

**(Collins, 2022)**

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If business schools fail to have an impact on their students and the clients for whom they work, then they are inadequately fulfilling their mandate.

In Africa, where context, societal demands, and widespread development challenges are far-reaching, business schools must be especially cognisant of the influence they wield and their potential to make an imprint that extends beyond the role of business to the creation of more inclusive and sustainable ecosystem.

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## Abstract

African and international business school experts all have an opinion on what impact means for business schools and how African institutions can go about increasing the relevance of their offerings.

Now, why should African business schools care about impact? Is it simply because it has become a buzzword for business schools the world over? Is it because management education institutions are battling for legitimacy in a world of easy-to-access digital solutions and a wealth of educational options? Or is it because producing quality leaders capable of navigating changing global and African contexts has ripple effects beyond business?

This paper sets out to categorise input from key commentators in an effort to better understand the areas where African business schools could be making a difference. Thereafter, the paper broadens the discussion to ways in which institutions of business and management education in Africa can reinvent themselves and their curricula to embrace a broader, more strategic role in society.

## Keywords

- Impact
- African business schools
- Business education
- Relevance in education
- Collaboration
- Strategy

# Impact: the global business school buzzword

Since the world's first business school was founded in the United States (US) in 1881 – the Wharton School of Finance and Economy – criticisms have been levelled at how business leaders are taught and developed (Wren and Van Fleet, 1983). In 1881, concerns hinged on the practical nature of the Wharton offering, and the fact that 'the business school would lower the "level of scholarship"' (Wren and Van Fleet, 1983: 29). Over time, this morphed into fears that the increased focus on academic excellence was impacting the practical 'competence of their graduates' or 'how well their faculties understand important drivers of business performance' (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005).

More recently, acclaimed authors and academics like Henry Mintzberg, Howard Thomas, and Ken Starkey have delved into the recurrent criticisms of business schools amidst fears that these institutions are no longer 'fit for purpose' (Starkey and Thomas, 2019) in a global environment undergoing profound mindset shifts around leadership, strategy, sustainability and the role of business in society. Mintzberg (2010: 1), a vocal critic of the global business school model, elaborated on his views in a personal essay:

*No manager, let alone leader, has ever been created in a classroom.... Management/ leadership is a practice, rooted in experience, not a science or profession, rooted in analysis. What a classroom can do is take people with that experience and the demonstrated skills of leadership, and leverage that alongside their natural inclination to drive necessary change.*

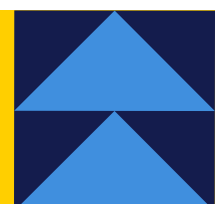
*It has been said about bacon and eggs that while the chicken is involved, the pig is committed. Development is about commitment: to the job, for sure, but also to the organization, and beyond that, to society in a responsible way.*

Similarly, the sustainability of the current teaching model of business schools has been found wanting, as has the focus on research and rankings at the expense of 'innovation and diversity in the

field', insufficient engagement with the practice of business, and the need to tailor curricula that are relevant to a changing world (Wilson and Thomas, 2012: 371). Collectively, these criticisms increasingly fall under the umbrella term 'impact' (Lejeune et al., 2019), which spans far more than mere economic or business impact, and should be seen to encompass a multi-stakeholder view that extends beyond academia and the student experience, including the private sector, media, professional and trade organisations, government, and the public sector (Thomas et al., 2013). More recently, Kalika and Shenton (2021) published a seven-dimension impact assessment system for business schools, broadening the discussion to, for instance, social impact, organisational culture, and economic development.

While many of these dimensions apply to African business schools, there are key differentiators within the African context that require a unique assessment framework for understanding the ecosystem in which African business schools operate and the available strategic opportunities for reinvention.

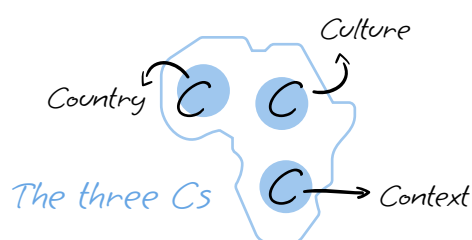
This paper proposes the **African Business School Impact Action Plan** as the starting point for such a framework.



# How can African business schools have impact?

Measuring impact in an African business school environment encompasses what Thomas defined as the 'three Cs': **Country, Culture, and Context** (Business Education Jam, 2018). In addition to these three Cs, businesses schools operating in Africa must expand their ecosystem to include the continent as a whole – specifically the region in which the institution operates, be it North, East, West, South or Central Africa. In much the same way that a Europe-based business school cannot divorce itself from the context of the European Union or a Latin American institution is undoubtedly influenced by the culture evolving from its unique geography and history, so too are the many areas of potential impact open to an African business school. Specifically, an African business school is coloured by the experience of the continent as a whole and the growing influence of an emerging African identity (Thomas et al., 2017).

**There is no limit to the areas in which African business schools can widen their footprint. Poised at the intersect of business, civil society and government, African business schools can – and should – carve out a more far-reaching role for themselves. A role that enables them to do more than just produce transformative leaders capable of driving business forward, but to equip those leaders with the skills and mindset necessary to solve Africa's many social, political, and economic challenges.**



## Prevailing challenges

### Gaining the perspective of role players

To achieve this vision, the author conducted 10 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with current and former African business school deans, international experts in management education, and educators and provocateurs in the higher education space.

### Research methodology

Twenty-five African experts, including business school deans, former deans or senior leaders based at business schools across the continent as well as global educators and provocateurs in the higher education space, were approached for comment.

Participation was voluntary and, in all instances, informed consent was obtained prior to the interview taking place. All comments and input from those interviewed were anonymised and any references within the data to individuals or identities were removed.

- Ultimately, 10 individuals were interviewed by means of semi-structured interviews.
- Commentators were asked two core questions:
  - In what ways can an African business school have impact?
  - How can/should business schools be reinventing themselves to have an impact?
- Themes were drawn using qualitative and intuitive analysis, supported by additional research.
- Experts' inputs were analysed through qualitative and intuitive analysis.



### Consensus

The initial findings have been drawn together to understand the areas of impact. Thereafter, a framework was formed that can be used by African business schools to gauge not only their current influence on the broader ecosystem, but also the strategic direction they should be following in the future.

It became evident that in order to amplify the range of impacts within the grasp of African business schools, the following must be achieved:

- Get the fundamentals of quality education right;
- Build solid reputations and faculty expertise;
- Collaborate within the continent;
- Create curricula that are relevant to both Africa and the world;
- Harness the reach of digital tools and innovation;
- Focus on working with business and government to solve African problems;
- Be bold in outlining areas of potential impact; and
- Create workable and forward-thinking strategies that support the purpose, relevance, and evolution of African business schools.

While it may still be possible for business schools operating in a developed world context to more neatly define the dimension of impact, the African experience must be integrally tied to the social, economic, and cultural advancement of the continent.

**To achieve the required depth of impact, African business schools must walk a tightrope between positioning themselves in the global order as institutions of quality and relevance, and adapting the prevailing business school model to make a tangible difference in African societies through practical outputs and measurable influence.**



## Insight overview

The qualitative data gathered highlighted a clear trend when it came to the impact of African business schools, namely that these institutions should be positioning themselves beyond the limits of business and carving out a space that moves beyond a narrow production of MBAs to contributing towards building more sustainable countries that collectively support Africa's development.

As one commentator observed:

*Business schools are about producing transformative leaders for society. Leaders with the relevant knowledge and know-how to drive this continent forward.... One of the ways we should measure business schools is the impact on quality of the graduates and moving the continent forward by solving key and major challenges and issues facing the continent. If we are not producing problem-solvers ... with the right competencies with the right vision for this content, then we are failing as a group of business schools.*

To effect this seemingly shared, long-term vision of a collective of institutions focused on 'educating people who can make a change and lead Africa', a roadmap is necessary, one that considers 'we are talking about not a country ... but a continent'. As one commentator said:

*It's enormously complex to truthfully answer these questions in the context of a continent versus a country or even a region of a continent. It's exceedingly complex when we talk about the African business school context in Liberia, or Ethiopia, versus a Ghana or a South Africa or a Nigeria. It's very, very difficult to embrace this or even discuss it in a one-size-fits-all model, because that model just doesn't exist.*





Moreover, it is important to recognise that, as a continent, grassroots development of the business school space is still in its infancy in some countries. As one commentator stated:

*We have 54 countries in Africa, but we don't even have 10 or 12 good business schools. At least we should have one good business school in every country. But that is not the case. I've always said there are three, maybe four, very good business schools in South Africa, one in Egypt, one or two in Morocco, one in Nigeria, one in Ghana, one in Kenya, one in Tunisia. That's about it.*

Furthermore, even this handful of standout institutions often do not make it onto the radar of the top global business schools when they go toe-to-toe with their European, American or Asian counterparts. Some of the comments in this regard were harsh, but paint a picture of global relevance that business schools operating in Africa cannot ignore. One of the commentators highlighted, 'African MBAs could have a better global context. There's room for dreamers, but we need people who can execute and our institutions can't afford to [be] ivory towers. We need action.' Another telling comment from a commentator that is worth noting:

*Business schools also have to teach people how to learn, unlearn and relearn. In that process, we will attract people who also have a sense of purpose, and not just a ... need for money. And people will come to and challenge business schools to give them that sense of purpose to connect with other like-minded people. We will be failing if we don't produce graduates who have no sense of purpose for this continent. We will be failing.*



Several commentators observed that there was already a tendency for African businesses to send promising employees abroad to study, rather than opting to send them to African institutions. This might also have something to do with an individual's expected annual salary, which after completing an MBA at Harvard Business School in the US is around US\$200 000 (Lake, 2021), versus an estimate of 'US\$50 000–US\$60 000 for a South African business school' (BusinessTech, 2019). This underlines the tendency of African businesses to send their top talent abroad to study. Therefore: **African business schools cannot afford to ignore the global context in which they are operating.**

However, even when operating within the confines of international accreditation and research guidelines, and competing on the world stage for top-flight academics, staff, and students, it is still possible, as one commentator put it, to ensure that **'The compass should be Africa.'**





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# Areas of impact

While the findings and insights gathered were in-depth and wide-ranging, several areas of impact were drawn out, which were broadly grouped as having either direct impact, social impact, or systemic impact (refer to Figure 1).

**Direct impact** refers to the business model and pedagogical approach of business schools themselves. This spills over to the broader **social impact**, which encompasses the society, students, and organisations that African business schools cater to and whose experience of the business school offering affects personal and professional approaches to business and leadership as well as the mindset and culture of organisations and their leaders.

Finally, **systemic impact** broadens the areas of impact to include country-specific influences, which have the potential to fundamentally change the national approach and discourse around key differentiators, such as leadership style and each country's standing in a globalised world.

Each subsystem of impact is outlined briefly in this section, supported by views expressed by the commentators.



Figure 1: The African business school impact ecosystem



# DIRECT IMPACT

The direct impacts raised during the qualitative analysis included: **programme and curriculum design**; the **quality and relevance of educational offerings**; the business school's **ability to produce top leaders who can navigate change**; **ensuring relevant research outputs and encouraging collaboration**, specifically at a pan-African level; and being mindful of the **role of current systems for academic rewards, promotions and rankings**. These impacts are examined in more detail below.

## Programme and curriculum design:

Given the context in which African business schools operate and the wealth of social, economic, infrastructure, governance, equality, and climate change issues facing the continent (Africa Growth Initiative, 2022), it was noteworthy that so many commentators focused on the importance of relevant and appropriate programme and curriculum design. Not all comments were positive, but they largely showed a desire to equip students with a stronger understanding of the issues facing Africa, from youth demographics to high unemployment rates and widespread corruption.

**Several commentators called for a 'module on the continent', which embeds a 'sense of purpose for this continent'.** Other insights included:

There are certain fundamental things that currently business schools [in Africa] are not in touch with. They still measure themselves by metrics that are very Western defined. The curriculum is very much driven from the centre, not with the aim of being relevant to where it is being delivered and which talent it is developing for.

You can't design a programme which may have come from Harvard, or wherever, and then expect it to work in Africa. Those models are a good starting point, but they have to be adapted.

I believe we put together a fantastic programme with [the institution] on doing business in Africa. But is it enough? No. Are we offering it to our business schools across the continent? Absolutely no. So, I think the problem is orientation, it's structure, it's resources. And it's looking at home – Africa – and try[ing] to fix the house before actually trying to work with others.

## Quality and relevance of educational offerings:

This impact was closely linked to the issue of curricula design and an African business school's ability to produce top leaders who can navigate change. These aspects of direct impact were also closely linked to a relevant Africa-focused offering.

*The kind of quality of graduates that business schools are producing should all tick a couple of non-negotiables. Things like a good understanding of the continent. They need to be on top of what the issues are facing the continent – not just their countries, but the continent at large. To addressing some of the issues that we are seeing in our current leaders, like a lack of integrity. Those should be non-negotiables. [As well as things like] a good understanding of the key developmental issues the country is facing.*



## Producing top leaders:

Several commentators felt that when it comes to leadership education, African business schools are not always producing leaders capable of taking the continent forward:

*We did some research on African leadership. Unfortunately, it wasn't a great result. What we saw was that we had a lot of absent leaders, absent managers in the organisation. They were drawing a salary but not doing any work. They are dealing with an environment that is so complex, an organisational environment and work environment that is so complex, it becomes intimidating. So, it's easier to do nothing, to just disappear. We call them absent managers.*



## Ensuring relevant research outputs and enhancing greater collaboration:

Another area of impact that faced considerable interrogation was the relevance of research outputs, which was integrally tied to enabling and encouraging greater collaboration between academics from around Africa. A consistent call for African business schools to undertake more practical and relevant research was supported by comments like:

*The faculty research mandate in business school should be different from the mandate in universities. Universities are more looking at theoretical frameworks and driving theory and academic research. [At] the business school, you are talking about relevant research that will help solve industry, social and institutional problems. It is more practical.*

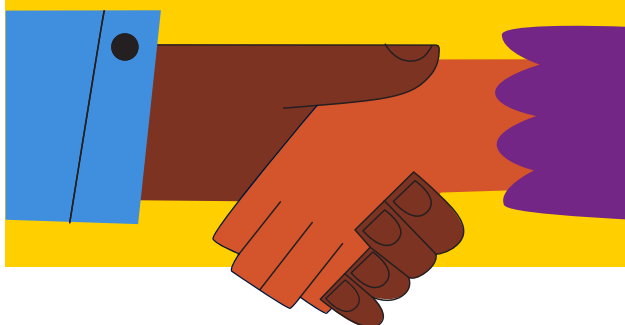
*How much research are our researchers doing on Africa? How many collective research projects – and consequently funding – is put for African researchers, from north to south, east, west, to work together in collaborative research projects? Things that address SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals], water, climate, sustainability... The opportunities for research that can transform society and impact policy is much, much higher when it comes to Africa than the other countries.*

*We want research that is published in those sorts of [A-star journals], but that research does not necessarily go towards solving Africa's either social or institutional problems. There's always a conflict. But I think there can be both.*

*There is a lot of work across many African countries around centres of excellence in research proper. I think that's a critical area. But I would suggest in many cases, it's got to be applied research. It's got to be research that is of immediate value to a sector.*

And then, some food for thought:

**The more we collaborate the more impact we'll make. That one thing that African business schools are not doing enough. Why do we send our students on exchange programmes only into schools in America, in Europe? Why don't we do more of it among the business schools in Africa? Why aren't the faculty collaborating in terms of research and programme design?**



## Current systems for academic rewards, promotions, and rankings:

In line with a desire to refocus research output towards practical African insights was a strong trend towards revisiting the role of current systems for academic rewards, promotions, and rankings. Instead of looking down on case studies and pushing for publication in top, five-star or four-star international journals, several commentators spoke of shifts in how compensation is determined and academics rewarded, with one expressing: 'We have to redefine how we recognise achievement of faculty in terms of promotions and rewards.' Other commentators suggested that faculty who consult to business, should be rewarded for that output, given that 'consulting not only helps to solve problems but you also bring current issues into the classroom'.

However, not all commentators favoured an approach that reduced the importance of being published in top journals, largely because African business schools still operate in a global and interconnected world and operating in a bubble would only seek to widen the gulf between leading global schools and those from the continent. As one commentator excellently stated:

***Business needs to really transcend borders, and leading business schools are truly international places ... places of excellent and unlimited 'internationaldom'. I'm not saying we should fixate on the north or northern hemisphere and western European studies and paradigms, but let's not deny the excellence that can be brought by those and applying them to our own cases, of which there are plenty. But are we trying to grow economies quickly, or maintain our status quo?***





# SOCIAL IMPACT

Drawing on the debate around relevant African research, the first key aspect of social impact concerned business schools **focusing on solving local problems**, which includes finding ways to be **relevant to the youth** and being mindful of the potential and challenges of a young continent, where almost 60% of the growing population is younger than 25 (Kariba, 2020). Closely linked to Africa's youth population was the growing call to upskill young Africans to **encourage entrepreneurship** (Ugochukwu, 2022).

## Solving local problems:

The comments and insights gathered pointed clearly to the fact that in order to maintain relevance in a changing and increasingly complex world, African business schools should be looking beyond the here and now and focusing on solving local problems as well as big-ticket, future-focused issues, such as sustainability, climate change, addressing poverty, and tackling corruption. Several commentators raised the importance of incorporating teaching around the SDGs into how companies are advised, to help them:

*to be purpose driven and go beyond just maximising profits. We tell them that successful businesses or business that are going to succeed in Africa in the long term, must have at least two engines: an economic engine and a social engine. And both engines must run simultaneously.*

One commentator raised the point that African business schools are largely not sitting at the table when it comes to participating in collaborations, such as the Impact & Sustainable Finance Faculty Consortium (a network of about 85 global business schools teaching impact investing in sustainable finance and innovative finance), despite having 'the most exciting impact problems' and the fact that 'ultimately, the progress towards the SDGs impacts on the quality of life of Africans'.

## Being relevant to the youth and entrepreneurship:

While there was criticism from the commentators that more could be done to shift the mindset around the SDGs and their impact on Africa, it was widely felt that when it comes to the youth and entrepreneurship, 'there's no graduate business school that doesn't have a sense of that problem and the implications, and the opportunity cost of not solving it'.

Recognising the potential of the post-independence generation to affect political and economic change across the continent, several commentators noted that a tendency to focus on theory at the exclusion of practical business education was holding back young graduates from making a meaningful dent when it came to profound issues impacting the African continent, such as poverty, corruption and unemployment. To truly tackle these wide-reaching challenges, one commentator noted that the younger generation needs to be equipped with more than purely academic thinking:

*I have always said that Africa is the continent of the 21st century ... in 2100 Africa will be completely different and by that I mean much, much better because of the growing, young, entrepreneurial population. But how is this reflected in our curricula? It's not a theme, it's not a direction that is properly integrated into the curriculum.*

Similarly, when it comes to building entrepreneurial know-how and capacity, it emerged strongly that would-be entrepreneurs require not only the necessary skills to run businesses, but also 'access to funding and hand-holding them, mentoring them ... even if they employ three, four or five people that is helping with unemployment and the economy'.

Several business school deans pointed to the establishment of enterprise development centres, whose impact could be measured by how many participants went on to succeed, grow, employ more people, and mentor others. Nevertheless, at a programme design level, one commentator criticised how little entrepreneurship was reflected in African business schools' curricula, noting: 'It's not a direction that is properly integrated into the curriculum.'



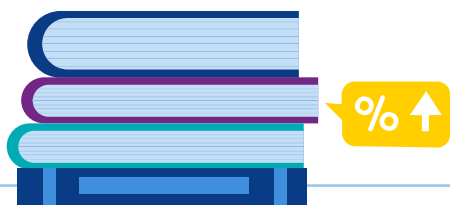
# SYSTEMIC IMPACT

While the social impact dimension had the potential to roll over into a broader, systemic impact, the qualitative analysis raised five areas in which African business schools could have an immediate and multi-pronged impact at a country – and possibly continental – level. These included becoming involved in **envisaging and developing a country's entire educational ecosystem** from primary to tertiary; finding ways to **influence policy**; **taking on the role of an advocate for change**; **working to capacitate leaders across society**; and **ensuring that business ethics are taught**. Many of these areas of potential impact would involve African business schools stepping out of the confines to which they are traditionally limited and recognising that business and economic success hinges on supporting functioning societies for all.

## Envisaging and developing a country's entire educational ecosystem:

Several commentators raised the point that the quality of the entire educational ecosystem across Africa had a ripple effect on the quality of candidates looking to access business school education:

*I think that we're starting to see the decline in the educational standards, therefore – certainly in my country – we are pulling from a pool of people who, in the majority, have accessed a lower quality of education than previously. Therefore, one of the ways that business schools can really have impact is what people get taught when they are in school, and how are they taught.*



## Influencing policy and advocating for change:

It behoved African business schools to determine how they could impact educational standards – be it through running social responsibility projects or at a more strategic level seeking to influence policy and advocate for change. A telling comment was:

*I've always believed that policy must be based on research. And that's where business schools come in. So, what is it that we are researching that provides the evidence that can persuade policymakers to look at this?*

## Teaching business ethics and seeking to capacitate leaders across all areas of society:

The view raised, was that while 'a business school that doesn't have academic excellence is really not fit for purpose', in the context of Africa, it is also important to be a change agent. 'It's got to be focusing on changing society and individuals for the better.' This translated into tackling endemic issues of corruption and maladministration across both the public and private sectors by teaching business ethics and seeking to capacitate leaders across all areas of society, such as public servants, business people, and leaders in key institutions like social organisations and non-profits. The need to support leaders in the public sector was highlighted by several commentators, with some noting that there is 'now talk about developing an executive programme for the public sector, at a very senior level and middle management level'. Such a move would make it easier for different strata of society to engage and collaborate, simply by helping disparate parties to better understand one another, while supporting the creation of 'competent and dynamic governments'.

Again, this shift in focus would require African business schools to really interrogate their future role and scope of impact, noted as follows:

*Most times we have a school of business, and then we have either a school of public policy or a school of governance. It's time we started to think about a nexus of both. What can we, as business schools teach, so people in public service can understand what those issues are ... or sometimes there's a lack of understanding, but there may be political or lack of will to be able to implement. There's scope for us to bring in policymakers.*





**Several commentators called for a 'module on the continent', which embeds a 'sense of purpose for this continent'.**

## Strategic reinvention: a proposed action plan

Based on the areas of direct, social, and systemic impact, the insights gathered from high-level commentators yielded a number of potential strategic shifts that African business schools could incorporate into their long-term plans to ensure relevance and to enhance current and future impact. These dimensions are presented in the form of an African Business School Impact Action Plan, which should be considered in line with each institution's strategic long-term vision and purpose, as well as the country and context in which it operates. While this plan of action is by no means exhaustive and additional research may well unlock further avenues for development, the qualitative and intuitive analysis undertaken points to a budding agreement on how to amplify impact among key players in the African business school space and supporters thereof.

The African Business School Impact Action Plan turns the spotlight on nine core areas which, if executed in concert, have the potential to radically change the face of the management education across the continent. These areas are:

1. Apply mindful evolution strategies;
2. Ensure context, country, and continent relevance;
3. Build regional cooperation;
4. Maintain a global outlook;
5. Consider future and unfolding contexts;
6. Deploy deliberate and innovative interventions;
7. Support greater autonomy and independence;
8. Engage with business and society; and
9. Develop world-class, credible faculty.

Figure 2 visually presents the envisaged African Business School Impact Action Plan, which is subsequently explicated.

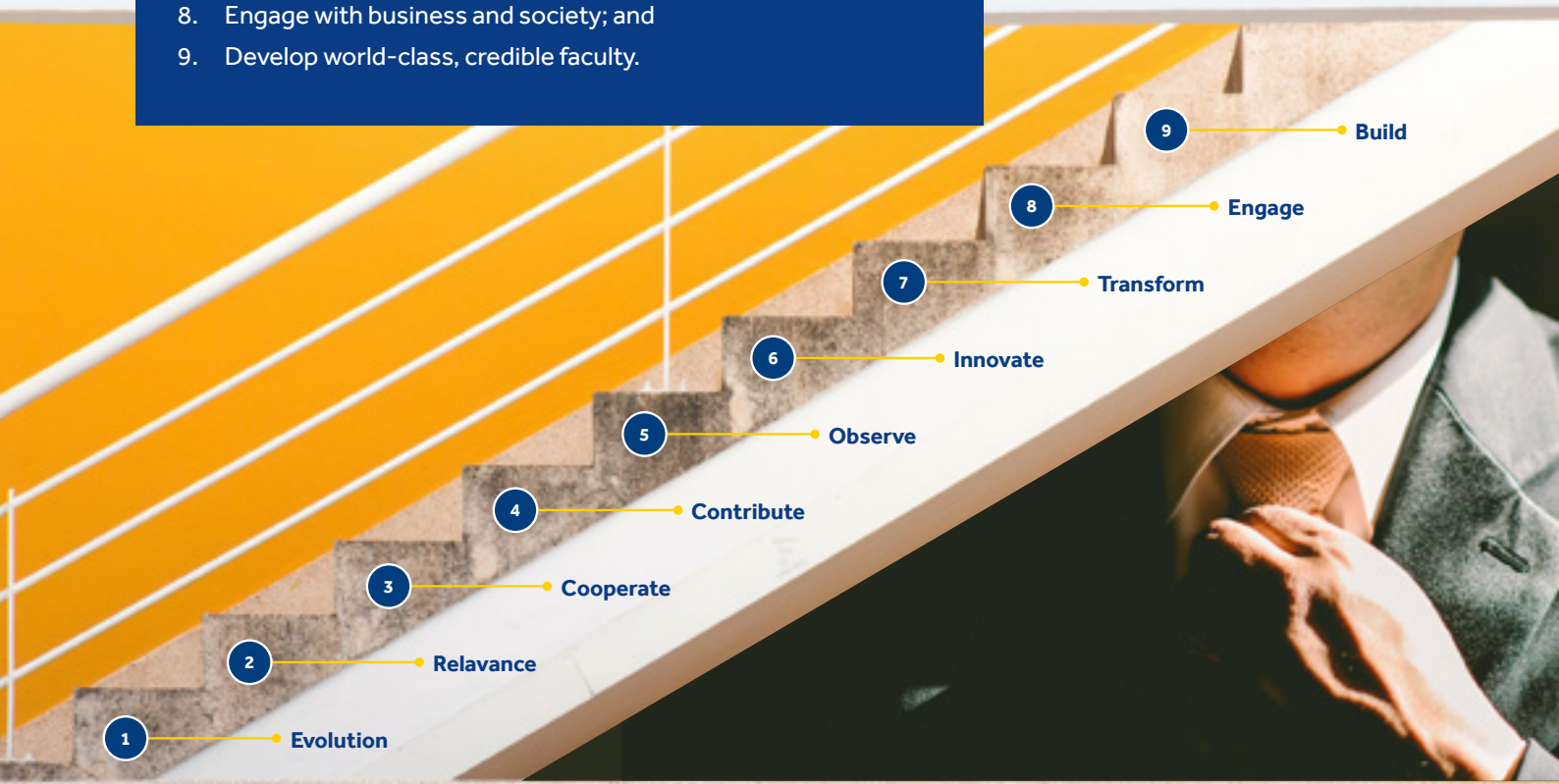


Figure 2: The African Business School Impact Action Plan

# Nine noteworthy core areas for consideration

While all inputs were valuable in building this action framework for the envisaged African Business School Impact Action Plan, various noteworthy points have been singled out per pillar. These points are outlined below.

1

## Evolution: apply mindful evolution strategies

For decades, business schools around the world have had a monopoly on business education. Now, accelerated by COVID-19 and the disruption caused by digitalisation, new players are emerging in the form of online and tech learning platforms.

**While the choices for students are seemingly endless, business schools around the world are pausing to reflect on what it means to be relevant and what role they must now serve in society. African business schools are no different.**

Recognising that governments alone cannot solve the myriad social problems facing any country, it is increasingly clear that business cannot sit on the sidelines; it must play a stronger role in solving critical problems. This also requires business schools to reflect on their educational offerings, the focus of their research agendas, and the type of leaders they seek to develop, as indicated in an interview:

*I think business schools are being forced to evolve. You see a lot of them doing a lot more research now, to connect with the industries. But I don't care what the US and UK [United Kingdom] schools are doing. We should be doing what is right for us. We can lead. We don't have to take trends from the West, or from the North. We know how to identify what's wrong or what's right, and we can fix it. They can learn from us as well.*

2

## Relevance: ensure context, country, and continent relevance

The ultimate goal of many commentators was to see a more united Africa, with greater collaboration and cross-border support. **Commentators roundly agreed that African business schools first need to 'understand their local communities, the individual communities that they serve, the country that they're serving in, and then the continental perspective'.**

At an individual country level, the words of management expert Peter Drucker certainly hold true: namely that culture eats strategy for breakfast (Guley and Reznik, 2019). Therefore, it was noted that business schools in Africa should begin their self-reflection on impact by understanding the context in which they operate. Only then will they be 'ready to share and get exposed to other cultures'. However, once ready to take on a continental role, the recommendation from one commentator was to collectively undertake an assessment of regional needs and develop that into a continent-wide plan of action.

*[African business schools] need to establish a needs assessment of what Africa wants. Every one of those 54 countries has a different context, in terms of economic growth, in terms of the investment in public utilities. But regionally, they hold together in some ways.... The way you build up the schools is to figure out what the needs are in those regions, and regions differ.*



### 3 Cooperate: build regional cooperation

Regional cooperation represented for many commentators an important goal to be attained.

**Strong, globally accredited business schools in specific regions would prove transformational and aspirational for other schools to emerge.**

One commentator asserted:

*The important thing in Africa is regions ... and if the regions are important, then the schools within that region should collaborate. They should be working together in sub-hubs, not simply saying they are competing with the aspirational schools.*

While recognising that healthy competition within countries and regions was both inevitable and motivating, several commentators noted that there is:

*room for more pan-African partnerships, relationships, ventures degree programmes, where a school says, we can do this, but we can't do this, so we need a partner to help to help make this happen. It's really the perfect landscape to see some of that.*

One suggestion for a model that Africa might like to adapt to its own needs is the Erasmus programme in Europe, which is an initiative that has been running for over 30 years and has provided opportunities for more than four million Europeans to study and train abroad. The Erasmus+ extension expanded the programme beyond students to include professors and professional staff (European Commission, 2017).

*I think there needs to be an African Erasmus project, but called something idiosyncratic to the continent. Students ought to have that opportunity for exchanges, as should professors, as should staff, to a different country across the continent, wherever the opportunity resonates most with that learner, or that professor, or that staff person. I think, and the European model is magical ... it's just a cool programme that has been sustained across the EU [European Union] for over three decades now.*

### 4 Contribute: maintain a global outlook

This pillar offered one of the strongest areas of criticism of current African business schools.

**Several commentators slated institutions across the continent for failing to equip African MBAs with a better global context, by 'looking at other post-complex societies and how they improved' and recognising that 'we can't sit on our laurels, we have to be globally competitive'.**

Much like the implications of the African Continental Free Trade Area should be an active inclusion in any African business school curricula, so too should trade with key partners like the European Union, China, and the US be tackled through courses specifically designed to understand the implications for cross-border business.

Another commentator noted that if African business schools are to produce globally competitive graduates, it is critical that a global outlook is not abandoned. Nevertheless, for this to happen, serious attention must be paid to global rankings.

Talking specifically to South Africa's institutions, arguably among some of the most successful on the continent, one commentator warned:

*The rankings are moving backwards. And we're ranking because we are not conforming to the reporting concepts that some of our Western and Eastern counterparts conform to, and that's because, again, we might be rejecting colonialism, we might be saying we're ploughing our own furrow, our own field. But I think there's a lot to be said for being globally relevant by confirming to the accreditation, but also the rankings, because rankings attract international students and international organisations to then recruit from those institutions of excellence.*



5

## Observe: consider future and unfolding contexts

Strategy, one of the cornerstone offerings of business schools around the world, is not just a business imperative, but an important focus for the very institutions that teach management education to the world. The African business school deans interviewed openly discussed their strategic plans to develop 'credibility as a strong brand' and 'use it effectively to drive economic development'. Linked to the global outlook point already raised: **areas of focus for some schools centred on gaining international accreditation, engaging more with industry and alumni, and trying to 'put the business school on the map'.**

Another view that links to the evolution of business schools concerned the strategic intent of these institutions:

*We call them business schools, but actually they should be called schools for management. Because management is about the three sectors: business, government and civil society. And all three of them have to work together in collaboration. So, it's about management of the trisector.*

6

## Innovate: deploy deliberate interventions

The ongoing focus on innovation is both necessary and inevitable for African business schools, given the growing impact of digital tools, online education, and a shift away from bricks-and-mortar institutions towards technology companies (Walsh, 2020) offering micro-credential and flexible bite-sized courses (De Novellis, 2021).

**While business schools grapple with the right balance between physical and digital world solutions, and how the exact blend, shape, and form will be like in the future, there was widespread acceptance that digitalisation is here to stay.**

In an African context, this supports the type of digital natives moving into university age, most of whom will be accessing this information 'by mobile, not by laptops or desktops'. The format and platforms on which educational offerings are presented is just one consideration for African business schools, the other points to challenges around IT infrastructure and connectivity in some countries and regions.

7

## Transform: support greater autonomy and independence

Numerous commentators on the ground in Africa had a lot to say about the typical university system that 'can frustrate the growth of a business school'. Some of the feedback from the commentators included the following:

*I strongly believe that business schools are a breed apart, an entity in their own right. Yes, they may well be units within a university, but the aim and thinking is totally different. The culture and approach, and the problems are totally different, and I think it needs to remain like that. Universities tend to be compliance-driven institutions ... they tend to be not-for-profit organisations and they have that kind of mentality.*

***In a business school, you need to be wealth generators, wealth creators in the broadest sense.... Take that aspect away and we just become another department within any university.***

The call for greater autonomy for African business schools was linked back to the importance of attracting top faculty and how that is aided by using different salary and reward structures to traditional universities, and to make more agile decisions in line with the fast-moving needs of business and economies. That said, a commentator noted that by virtue of being associated with recognised universities, many African business schools gained legitimacy, which they might not enjoy were they fully autonomous.

8

## Engage: engage with business and society

Without open dialogue and engagement with business, society, and government, the consensus was that business schools in Africa would always be behind the curve in terms of needs and current trends. Therefore, ongoing opportunities to engage were seen as critical by many commentators. The European Foundation for Management Development's (EFMD's) Excellence in Practice Silver Award winners for 2022 highlight the value of collaborative projects and programmes between business schools and business, showing just how impactful client-supplier partnerships can be to address challenges in the areas of organisational, talent, leadership, and ecosystem development. Of the 2022 Silver Award winners, Standard Bank and Henley Business School Africa walked away with the laurels for a talent development acceleration that involved 'eight other industry-leading providers and 11 internal executive experts' and 'created a symphony of learning that echoed across 14 African countries' (Gregoire, 2022).

One suggestion to further break down the barriers between business, society, and academia was to create pan-African partnerships, themed business school competitions, and collaborative efforts ranging from internship and employment opportunities to hosting regional workshops and discussion forums to engage across borders with experts from business, government, society and academia. As one commentator put it:

*One of the strengths of business schools is their convening paths, so we can convene key players ... convey round-table conversations, present the research and then see whether that can form the basis to influence policy. I think that will have a much wider impact than what interventions we choose to do, either on our own or through alumni.*

However, for such an approach to work, it was critical that business schools fully appreciated that they were not able to do this alone. They too need to engage across all aspects of society:

**Business schools need external support if they are to position themselves at the centre of the national conversation. However, it is essential that egos are left at the door and an acceptance is baked in from the beginning that input is likely to be both disruptive and constructive.**

9

## Build: develop credible faculty

The final pillar, and perhaps one of the most important for any effective action plan, must be attracting credible faculty who are 'respected and seen as experts in their own field'.

**The depth of any African business school's faculty speaks directly to the direct impact areas of quality education and output, be it the calibre of graduates or the level of published research.**

This connects back to international standards and accreditation. Moreover, it requires being serious about global perceptions of a country:

*To really attract world-class international students ... that needs rankings, ratings, and attracting world-class academics. But you are going to struggle to attract world-class staff into a volatile country – a lot of investment decisions were reversed on the back of [the July 2021 riots in South Africa], on top of your natural disasters, the floods and fires. South Africa is not a dangerous posting, but it increasingly is and you are going to struggle to attract world-class talent.*



# The role of business school associations

Central to the successful adoption and implementation of the **African Business School Impact Action Plan** is the role of various business school bodies and associations active in Africa, including the Association of African Business Schools (AABS), the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) International, EMFD's European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) accreditation, Business Graduates Association (BGA), and the Association of MBAs (AMBA).

As an indication of the increased activity of business school associations in Africa in recent years and the importance of aligning African business schools with global standards, it is notable that, in 2021, Henley Business School Africa became the first business school to receive accreditation by the AABS, a quadruple accreditation joining the school's existing accreditation from AMBA, EFMD, and AACSB (CHRO South Africa, 2021). The University of Stellenbosch Business School became the first 'African-born' institution to achieve the AACSB, EQUIS, and AMBA troika in 2012 (Matthee, 2012), while in 2021, the North-West University Business School in South Africa was the first institution in Africa to receive accreditation from the BGA (eNCA, 2022).

Commentators recognised how bodies like those highlighted above as well as the likes of the Global Business School Network are making strides to improve the impact of business schools in developing markets through fostering collaboration, networking, and the sharing of knowledge. Furthermore, commentators noted that central bodies, such as the AABS, have an even more influential role to play in embedding issues like autonomy and sustainability into accreditation and working at the intersection of business and academia to ensure that business school graduates are equipped with relevant skills to ensure absorption into businesses. Other comments and suggestions directed squarely at the AABS by commentators included:

*When I look at what AABS is doing, they have their annual event, sometimes they have workshops to train faculty on writing case studies and the like, and in 2021 they started the Deans and Directors one-day forum. But that's about it. They are not as active ... let's have regional workshops, training faculty and promoting collaboration, about how to write proposals to land grants, research.*

*We can have those workshops more. We need to provide opportunities for business schools to work together to be able to realise more impact.*

*AABS could be the platform inviting other schools to work together to get the funding. It's not that AABS can do it alone, by the way.*

*The board of AABS should focus on a theme it promotes, like the impact of African business schools on SDGs and focus on that for a year or two and see what is the impact. And then we move on to something else. That way we could publish an annual or biannual report on the role of giving back and the role of African business schools in serving societies.*

*If us business schools would always put AABS in the loop, that will encourage AABS. AABS should be the umbrella where we all operate. It's up to AABS to decide where they want to position themselves.*



Equally, there was frustration with the internationalisation agenda of global business school bodies, some of which (e.g., the EFMD) base 'around 80%' of their accreditation criteria on internationalisation. This was seen as holding Africa-focused business schools back and driving institutions on the continent to partner abroad rather than within the continent.

*Many years ago, when we first decided to try for accreditation, it was an uphill task just trying to get them [international business school bodies] to look at Africa. And, by the way, South Africa was not considered so African, but if we look at the rest of sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa, it was hard. Because of the global financial crisis, and declining growth in other regions, they started looking for areas of growth, and Africa and Asia came up, and business schools followed the trend and associations and business schools were looking at those places. In some cases, change has been slow.*

**An area in which associations could play an important role in facilitating the sort of pan-African collaboration called for in the African Business School Impact Action Plan is in creating the landscape for cooperation between countries and within regions.**

This was achieved following the 2020 Abraham Accords peace treaty between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco by the AACSB, when the association brokered relationships between members across these borders. The process began with student and professor exchanges and collaborative research. This facilitation role could lay the foundation for future regional relationships and possibly an African Erasmus programme.







**Central bodies,  
such as the AABS,  
have an even more  
influential role to play.**

# Conclusion

This white paper is the first step in a critical, continent-wide change process envisaged for business schools. By identifying and categorising the pillars of potential impact and the strategic intent that must be harnessed to deliver on those desired outcomes, it has been possible to create a shared framework for discussion and collaboration.

The next step is to open the door to stage two, which requires delivering on the insights shared. This will take a bold commitment from deans of African business schools; educationalist, business, and civil society organisations, and institutions like the AABS. Action is often where Africa lets itself down. Too often, grand plans and ambitions wind up in what English essayist Augustine Birrell termed 'that great dust heap called "history"' (Safire, 1983). As one commentator said: **'We need to be critical, but we also need practical solutions.'**

Shifting academic institutions is, as one commentator observed, not a swift process, but external and internal forces are currently conspiring to drive an evolution that every African business school should be aware of. The scope of the changes facing the sector are vast, but should be undertaken as part of an incremental process, building momentum, enthusiasm, and success through small wins that ultimately yield big results.

**Most importantly, change will require proactivity and positivity, discipline, 'knowing how to cycle spot and how to overcome biases', as well as 'some guts from the top' to drive far-reaching shifts.**

In this process, the African business school dean is a pivotal player. One commentator concluded: **'A dean that agrees with the last faculty member in their office is not a good dean. It takes honesty and integrity to come up with solutions that are balanced.'**



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