

Africa has experienced economic growth ahead of the global average in the past decade, but while the “continent as a country” treatment might be appropriate when considering demographic trends and – to some degree, economic shifts – we can’t assume there is a single common denominator driving political change from Algeria to Zambia.

Nevertheless, even though the challenges vary, depending on the perspective you adopt, a high-level theme that appears to be permeating African politics is that of volatility. And on the economic side, while tapping into Africa’s ability to supply the commodities required to fuel global consumer and industrial demand is nothing new, domestic appetite has grown dramatically.

“Citizens face different challenges from those of businesses that seek to benefit from high relative levels of economic growth,” says Prof Nicola Kleyn, Dean of the Gordon Institute of Business Science (Gibs). “Navigating the political uncertainties and poor physical and institutional infrastructure that prevail across much of the continent requires organisations which are used to operating in developed markets to rethink their investment levels, risk appetites and business models.”

She believes stakeholders, including business, government and civil society, need to



# THE AFRICAN DIME I

With Africa undergoing rapid economic and political transformation, we investigate whether the continent’s business schools are well-positioned to respond to the changing needs of the continent

collaborate to identify key areas of focus to address Africa's "wicked problems" that threaten human development and prosperity. Piet Naudé, Director of Stellenbosch Business School, agrees. He explains that good leaders in both public and private sectors and a focus on small-medium enterprises to grow employment are needed.

"There are only a few reputable business schools in Africa and they are pretty good at adjusting to African situations," Naudé says.

"The reputable ones deliver formal degrees of high quality, as well as excellent executive education programmes."

Still, it's important to note the significant underrepresentation of business schools on the African continent. The USA's Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business estimates that there are more than 13 000 business schools across the globe, but the number of African schools relative to the total is miniscule.

Furthermore, a recently published article in the *Journal of World Business* identified only 37 schools across the continent. Even though SA has the most business schools per capita in Africa, the South African Business Schools Association has only 18 members.

"The quality of business schools on the continent varies enormously," Kleyn says. "Increasingly, the top schools are focusing on ensuring they do not

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'cut-and-paste' research themes, curricula and learning support materials from other continents."

She believes the growing number of international schools bringing their students to countries such as SA, Botswana and Kenya to study topics such as international business, social innovation, entrepreneurship and sustainability is testimony to the business lessons the continent has to offer.

"Given our high economic growth rate and focus from multinationals, it's no surprise that researchers from schools beyond the continent are increasingly investigating business in the African context," Kleyn says. "Sadly, the dearth of home-grown PhD students across the continent, coupled with often stringent visa requirements, limits the development and mobility of scholarly talent."

It will take more investment to build scholarly capability across the continent if African business schools are to train the growing numbers of managers that the continent will undoubtedly need. It also requires business schools to understand the intellectual tension between globalisation and Africanisation.

"We'll probably have to move to lower education levels to serve entrepreneurship for those leaving school or even without formal education, while retaining our higher-level work," says Naudé. "It will take a continued discussion between business, government and schools so that schools can adjust according to real needs, while retaining a global orientation."

Although the Gibbs focus has been primarily on SA, its customised academic programmes are increasingly exploring business in the broader African context. The school has recruited and developed faculty members to ensure they have a strong grasp of the issues faced by entrepreneurs seeking to grow their businesses in Africa. It has

also emphasised the evolution of curricula, learning interventions and supporting materials to align with the challenges and opportunities local managers deal with daily.

"We place a strong emphasis on contextually relevant themes such as social cohesion, inclusive business, building institutional capability and risk management," Kleyn says. "Enabling students to bridge theory with the realities of running businesses across the continent has resulted in the development of interventions that emphasise experiential learning and engagement with business and stakeholders in the broader ecosystem."

Ultimately, Kleyn believes business schools have an important role to play in developing and disseminating thought leadership that will assist businesses and economies not only to thrive, but to reduce poverty, inequality and unemployment by tapping into the real opportunities that exist to create value for Africa's many stakeholders. And so, besides adapting academic programmes and executive education, Gibbs has also focused on the development of think tanks, including the Centre for Dynamic Markets and the Centre for Leadership and Dialogue, underlining its belief that business schools have an important role to play in fostering engagement between government and civil society.

"Business schools need to bridge global best practice with local relevance," says Kleyn. "This calls for us to build strong connections with peers in countries across the continent and those in other regions. We need to define our teaching and research agendas in ways that contribute not only towards building knowledge about leading and managing businesses in Africa, but also towards making a substantive contribution to new ways of thinking." **DM**

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