

Research and Positive Impact: Henley Business School in the African context

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Concepts of the Purposeful Business School

Business does not exist in a vacuum; it is intrinsically linked to the success or failure of the society in which it operates. On a continent like Africa, where social, environmental and historical challenges abound, issues such as inequality, poverty and inclusive growth continue to dominate the context. Yet, African academia continues to follow the line drawn by Western business education models, rather than carving out an African model of management education that addresses the specific economic and social development needs of the continent as a whole.

Books have been written in an attempt to understand the African conundrum, including the 2017 pan-African analysis of the African continent's management education future direction, by Howard Thomas, Michelle Lee, Lynne Thomas and Alexander Wilson (Thomas *et al.*, 2017). The general consensus is that while African institutions of higher learning know they need to embrace their African identity and develop in harmony with the needs of the continent, they have been constrained by internal barriers and the lack of a cohesive approach.

This is understandable given the complexities inherent in the continent. Any discourse around Africa must recognise that our continent comprises 54 unique countries with more than 2,000 living languages (Statista Research Department, 2023) and around 3,000 ethnic groups from the Tuareg of the Sahara Desert to the Maasai of East Africa (Further Africa, 2022). Therefore, when we speak of learning in the African context, of African culture or indigenous knowledge, we are speaking in addition, about learning across colonial borders imposed by the likes of the British, Dutch, French, Germans, Italians and Portuguese; a legacy which may have left a continent divided in itself but still resplendent in wider diversity, culture and context.

Furthermore, breaking down the mental barriers imposed through colonialism is no mean feat. Yet this is increasingly the narrative emanating from Africa itself, enabled by unifying bodies such as the African Union and African Development Bank, and more recently the promise of greater economic and trade cohesion through the continent-wide African Continental Free Trade Area (Thomas, 2022). In the context of business and management education, this role is fulfilled by the Association of African Business Schools (AABS) (AABSchools, n.d.); a conduit for collaboration, impact and – increasingly – as a forum to debate the future relevance of business schools on a continent beset by challenges.

As the first business school in Africa to receive the AABS accreditation, Henley Business School Africa (Henley Africa) has long called for the decolonisation of education in Africa and of helping African institutions, African researchers and African academics to find their own voice. Similarly other institutions, such as the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business as well as African business schools like Lagos Business School in Nigeria and South Africa's Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), UCT Graduate School of Business and Stellenbosch Business School, have also argued along similar lines.

This necessary and ongoing debate does not imply turning away entirely from established models, but rather seeking to offer accessible education that has relevance in the African context and which speaks to the needs of African businesses and the development of the specific leadership skills needed to manage ingrained uncertainty and volatility.



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HOW TO FRAME AN AFRICAN BUSINESS SCHOOL MODEL

Henley Africa is by no means alone in seeking to create a more relevant model of business education and leadership development for emerging markets such as Africa. Leading business schools across Africa – including other AABS-accredited institutions and the six members of the newly launched Business Schools for Climate Leadership Africa (BS4CL Africa) initiative (Rabie, 2023) – have begun to collaborate closely on pivotal issues such as the climate crisis, leadership interventions, research and issues of social relevance.

As Sherif Kamel, Dean of AUC School of Business in Egypt, noted at the launch of the BS4CL in January 2023: “Our ultimate goal is for business schools to effectively address climate change issues by integrating timely and critical subjects within the business schools’ ecosystem. This encompasses teaching, curriculum, cases, and projects including research endeavours and business development activities, as they help shape the next generation of leaders to impact society” (Rabie, 2023).

This overview should, in fact, underpin more than just our climate change efforts as an African business school community. It highlights the sort of system-wide change needed to have a direct and positive impact on our home continent, and around the world. As argued in a new Henley Africa white paper, ‘Climate action: An Existential Priority for African Business Schools’ (Foster-Pedley *et al.*, 2023): “Our business schools – regardless of their good reputation – will fail, unless we accept that fundamental changes to the way we do business will, in future, require meaningful changes to how we teach, the voices we echo, how curricula are designed, and how executives go out into the world to create and run organisations.”

As things stand, we have to ask if academia in general – and business schools in particular – are up to the task. And if we are honest, no they are not. They need to change, and faster than ever before, given the unexpected disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the continuing war in Ukraine, as well as the widening inequality gap between Africa and the rest of the world.

AN EMERGING AFRICAN MODEL

An emerging African business school model holds global relevance not only for emerging economies but for a world grappling to develop the leadership and organisational competencies needed to navigate an unpredictable and changeable environment. The theme of the 2023 EFMD Annual Conference, which explored the role business schools can play in helping organisations and leaders to manage this uncertainty, is testament to the depth of this global challenge.

In Africa, leaders from all spheres of society are confronted on a daily basis with deep-seated challenges. Therefore, if African business schools are to recognise the potential impact they could have across the entire ecosystem of society, it is clear that producing agile leaders is not enough. It is also necessary to play a more active role in identifying African-facing problems and engaging with all stakeholders to advance impactful solutions.

In 2022, Henley Africa released insights from a research project aimed at amplifying the impact of business schools across Africa (Foster-Pedley, 2022). Building on insights generously shared by leading African and international business school experts, we considered the direct (business school environment), social (addressing social problems) and systemic (society as a whole) impact that African business schools should be having. Among the core areas identified was the need to invest more heavily in quality research that is relevant to Africa’s needs and which is geared towards solving and contributing to ideas to solve social and environmental issues. In order to get faculty on board, it is important to ensure that Africa-relevant research is promoted and rewarded, so African faculty produce excellent research that enables them to stand toe-to-toe with our international counterparts.

Equally so, it is critical to ensure that action research – which holds such potential to change society for the better – is available widely via open-access platforms and publishers. Without paywalls, there is more scope that such research can step out of the hallowed halls of academia and make impactful difference on the ground. This is, after all, the crux of action research which can be defined as a collaborative “emergent inquiry process in which applied behavioural science knowledge is integrated with existing

organisational knowledge and applied to address real organisational issues. It is simultaneously concerned with bringing about change in organisations, in developing self-help competencies in organisational members, and adding to scientific knowledge” (Shani and Coghlan, 2021).

In a 2021 review of applying action research in the business and management context, Abraham Shani and David Coghlan concluded that the process of conductive research with the intention of providing solutions to a problem provided a “potential vehicle for meeting the increasing challenges that systems and organisations faced, but as currently practised and researched in business and management, the potential has barely been tapped” (*ibid*).

To really advance a meaningful action research agenda will, of course, require greater alignment and discussion between stakeholders across society to identify areas requiring focus and research, and which should ideally have the potential to positively impact society or steer innovation and thinking in a new direction.

There are other action areas which also warrant attention:

- **Reinventing the business school curriculum** - It is important to acknowledge the place that indigenous knowledge systems hold in African culture, and how including traditional systems that span health and trade, agriculture and environmental management can offer answers to complex modern-day questions (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019). Furthermore, in a world where micro-credentials and online offerings are proliferating, where skills shift in the blink of an eye, and where younger generations are demanding fresh, hands-on approaches to learning, higher education institutions need to offer a range of approaches and touch points that include both theoretical and practical elements. More needs to be done in Africa to embrace vocational and technical education, to harness technology-enabled learning and to shift thinking from a degree-first approach to a stronger appreciation on the acquisition of valued skills via modules or short courses. These days learning is a life-long pursuit, so rather than a straight ladder it should be viewed as a meander through areas of interest and opportunities.
- **Creating pipelines for learning** – At Henley Africa we are developing more short programmes, and we will continue working with our clients to create a pathway to learning as an alternative to the classic university model. Only 6% of South African school starters get a degree within six years of leaving school, compared to 50% in the United Kingdom. In Africa, many talented people go into organisations where they are trained and become highly capable, but in the process, they miss the chance to get onto the qualifications ladder – which need not be a formal degree, but a certification that carries enough weight to ensure that the holder is able to progress even further in their chosen career. We’ve created a new pathway of learning that allows executives and managers to get back on the qualification pathway while developing competencies that are immediately helpful to their businesses. This builds up management capabilities, so it is an approach that strengthens African management and personal development.
- **Actively promote collaborations and partnerships** – This has long been a priority for institutions of higher learning, but in the case of Africa this means carefully leveraging both intra-Africa and global relationships, without giving precedence to one over another and with the confidence to promote African ideas on the world stage.
- **Strengthen ties with industry** – This is a critical point on so many levels: as a barometer of the skills needed by businesses now and in the future, as a means of ensuring that programmes are developed to make a discernible impact in the workplace, and a way of ensuring that research is in line with the needs of both the economy and society.
- **Strengthening ties with communities** – It has never been more important for business schools to leverage their trusted position in society by engaging closely with stakeholders across the board. The 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report, when noting the levels of trust in institutions of higher learning, made the point that learning institutions should build on this trust advantage to make a difference in the world, specifically around issues of climate change (Edelman, 2022). In today’s online world there are any number of forums and events that can take place across borders.
- **Improve governance and management of business schools** – Without robust and strategic leadership aligned to the improvement of society as a whole, Africa’s business schools will fail to reach their full potential. A critical part of this leadership role must be focused on investing in the development of quality faculty to constantly improve the level of education offered as well as the foresight to incorporate innovative methods and techniques, such as embracing technologies like virtual reality (VR) and packaging research insights in an accessible, online format for busy business leaders.

- **Be prepared to take a more proactive, even activist stance** – The issues of climate, corruption, environment and fair opportunity (either actively or potentially) are so deeply damaging to the present and future, and to the prosperity of businesses, economies and full societies, that business schools need to be prepared to enter into a new territory. It is necessary to exercise our voice, rather than just speech, in our pronouncements and writings.

All of these areas of development should start with a realistic, no-holds-barred assessment of the capacity and existing culture within a business school.

AFRICAN ACADEMICS MUST CONFRONT SOME HARD TRUTHS

At this juncture, African business schools are being challenged to find the right balance between preserving academic freedom and advancing their global standing, and that of their faculty, with the wider imperative to serve growth, prosperity and create employment. A question many African deans are asking themselves is: What is the point of producing journal articles, research and case studies just to secure promotion in an academic system that is failing in its role of producing the skills needed for growth?

This is a particularly pertinent discussion in societies where abstract theories and ideas simply do not get implemented because of a fundamental lack of skills needed to drive adaptation and implementation. Indeed, this is a critical consideration in a country like South Africa that is struggling to produce the sort of talent required to affect the level of change being demanded by the economy and pressing social challenges. As educators, this raises the need to critically question the structure and approach to education in general and to debate the morality and focus of research that does not seek to solve social ills and advance prosperity.



When you start to ask these questions, it becomes clear that the outdated industrial revolution-era system of education is unable to keep pace with the human capital needs of a changing world. Rather than continuing to slowly and incrementally follow an academic model that is effectively a colonial era appendix (Kigotho, 2022), African and other emerging market nations should be advancing an alternative model that works for the needs of their economies and people, rather than one that continues to position research, models and theories from the Global North above those from Africa and the Global South.

While calls to decolonise education have been accelerating in recent years, we have to ask ourselves if this goes far enough (Foster-Pedley, 2020). Greater focus should be given to questioning the structures, habits and orientation of universities in Africa which by their embedded western intellectual biases and values may not act helpfully. Instead of treating the Western model of higher education as a sacred cow, business schools in particular need to find ways of working with technical and vocational models, as well as building greater agility into the system – both of which would extend the reach needed in Africa. Rather than attaching decolonisation solely to issues of pedagogy, African institutions need to revisit our values and determine where our current ethos and perspective is not just out of touch but simply a colonial relic. If so, then we must adapt accordingly.

This will require a mindset shift across the African business school ecosystem, and especially among African academics themselves. To quote African anthropologists Artwell Nhemachena and Munyaradzi Mawere: “Africa cannot afford professors who enjoy burying their heads in the hot sands of the tropics: it is simply too costly for intellectual progress on a continent that has already suffered, for long, the travails of cargo cult¹ mentalities (Nhemachena and Mawere, 2022).”

Getting this right will require a new system, which might include new forms of educational institutions, theory building that is more progressive and inclusive, as well as the uptake of novel and more productive forms of research – such as action research.

Given that Africa still produces less than 1% of the world’s research (Duermeijer *et al.*, 2018) - despite being the continent most beset by challenges identified under the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNDP, 2022) – it could be argued that solution-focused action research holds great potential as an avenue for African academics to shift global perspectives.

HENLEY AFRICA: ALIGNING RESEARCH, INSIGHT WITH THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

In recent years, projects that speak to Henley Africa's drive to support a model of African management education have been recognised for their innovation and impact by associations such as the EFMD.

A standout example is the 10-day pan-African leadership programme that was created by Henley Africa and the Gordon Institute of Business Science, another well-respected South Africa-based business school. Created for Africa-wide banking group Standard Bank, as a novel way of enabling executives from across the bank to tap into their leadership potential, the #unTAP strategic leadership programme gathered a diverse group of leaders from various countries in Africa and challenged them to collaborate and stretch themselves. As Henley Africa's Director of Executive Education, Linda Buckley, noted at the time: "The classes were deliberately diverse, a melting pot of culture, creed, race and gender. A lot of the learning shifts actually came from within the groups themselves, we were the alchemy in the process" (EFMD Global, 2020).

Not only did this programme start life by confronting the challenges being faced by the bank, but it also embraced collaboration – both among the programme designers and participants – and reinforced ways in which to work in diverse teams; an increasingly vital business capability in Africa and around the world (Eswaran, 2019).

The #unTAP programme went on to win gold for outstanding case study in the executive development category of the 2020 EFMD Excellence in Practice Awards (EiP).

In 2021, another Standard Bank learning programme, Acceleration, took silver in the talent development category at the EiP. Programme Director Dr Puleng Makhoalibe, who also shepherded the #unTAP programme to success, called Acceleration "a truly African programme uniting leaders to take the bank and the continent forward" (HR Future, n.d.). Makhoalibe unpacked her approach to developing human-centric, creative and life-changing leadership interventions in her recent white paper, 'Using the Project Artistry framework to optimise executive education' (Makhoalibe, 2023).

Our ongoing efforts to create an optimal learning environment for students include actively embracing the potential of new technologies such as virtual reality and immersive learning, which is proving an impactful way to upskill managers at scale across Africa by drawing them into a virtual space in which they can interact and learn from one another, thereby closing geographic barriers to engagement and understanding. Being able to expose African business executives to continent-wide networks and unique business challenges and solutions expands the

depth of learning, improves engagement levels and fosters a greater appreciation of the complexity and agility required by executives leading in the African context (Claassen, 2022).

In August this year we formalised the exciting work we have already embarked on in the immersive space under the banner of a new research centre, Henley Explore. Our fifth dedicated research centre, alongside others that focus on international business, reputation, leadership and consumer studies, Henley Explore is headed by our Head of Research, Professor Danie Petzer, and co-director Louise Claassen. Henley Explore strives to provide delegates with truly immersive experiences in an African context using a unique combination of VR films and case studies.

Already, the partnership that Henley Explore co-director Claassen has nurtured with Kenyan production company BlackRhino VR since 2019, has produced four VR films and 10 accompanying case studies. The latest VR film, focusing on South Africa's state-owned rail, port and pipeline company Transnet, is accompanied by three case studies. The VR films produced to date have been successfully used in executive education interventions and as part of Henley Africa's Postgraduate Diploma in Management Practice in Africa (*ibid*), and many of the learnings from this process have been shared in Claassen's 2022 white paper, 'Virtual Reality in Business Education'.

Recognising that accessible research should not only appeal to seasoned academics but to business leaders, executives, trend analysts, policy makers and commentators, our faculty are also collaborating with business to bring complex Africa issues to the fore and spark conversations around potential solutions. In 2023 our research output included insights by Kelly Alexander into the role of business leaders in Africa's renewable energy transition (Alexander, 2023); a case study by Lorenzo Messina exploring the importance of a strong risk culture (Messina, 2022) in the context of South Africa's fight against corruption; and a collaboration between Henley Africa's Petzer and Vickey de Villiers, together with Professor Marianne Matthee from GIBS and Stellenbosch University's Dr Stefanie Kühn, focused on South Africa's fresh fruit industry and how to optimise export performance (Petzer *et al.*, 2023).

Another prime example is Henley Africa Executive Fellow Dr Mélani Prinsloo's forthcoming white paper 'Understanding the land title, tenure tightrope: Is technology the solution to Africa's complex land ownership challenges?' This contribution perfectly illustrates the complexities of shoe-horning Western 'best practice' into a complex system without due regard for traditional means of determining land ownership and tenure.

IN CONCLUSION

These examples are an appetiser of the level of complexity and relevance which all African business schools should be hoping to achieve. Asking pertinent, context-driven questions that don't brush inconvenient truths under the carpet, can open a wealth of areas for study and examination while also helping to grow and develop Africa for the betterment of all.

The research conducted for Henley Africa's 2022 white paper, 'Amplifying the impact of African business schools', provides some future direction for research output that is more action-orientated, practical and relevant to addressing core issues of development and process across the African continent. Among the input received in compiling this paper was a strong sense that by working closely with a sector or government department to identify issues and blockages upfront, it would be possible to produce research of immediate practical value. Applying this approach across society, government and civil society would create a treasure trove of actionable ideas to help solve social, business and institutional challenges (Foster-Pedley, 2022).

Furthermore, as an immediate compass, African institutions need only look to the SDGs as beacons demanding action and input; the solving of which would make an immediate and profound difference to the lives and prospects of Africans. The priority areas based on an SDG-focused approach, must certainly include youth-related challenges such as entrepreneurial skills, opportunities and funding, as well as ways in which to advance education in line with technology, teaching ethics and building stronger ties with fellow African institutions – as well as global educators – to share outputs. Finding ways to support and accelerate the establishment of start-up companies, created as university spin-offs as a result of research, is another avenue for future development and is something that Stellenbosch University and the University of Cape Town in South Africa do particularly well (Jafta and Uctu, 2013).

Finally, by sharing our reflections on both successes and failures, and learning from other business schools in Africa and across the Global South, it is hoped that this call for a new, democratised and decolonialised African business school model will find fertile ground.

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