

Africa's business schools need to be locally relevant and globally wise

By [Kutiwano Ramaboa](#)

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If [99.6% of businesses](#) in a country like Nigeria employ fewer than 10 workers, does it make sense to teach Nigerian business students how to manage Fortune 500 companies in the US using Harvard Business School case studies? This question, raised by the [African Management Initiative](#) in a recent report, sums up the complex nature of the challenge facing African business schools when picking a path between global recognition and local relevance.



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There is no doubt that business schools need to demonstrate international relevance, whether through the programmes they offer, or the content they teach. This allows them to attract international students and faculty. And, perhaps more importantly, it offers students a chance to experience international contexts. International mobility in today's global business world is a key requirement.

At the same time, schools need to cater to the [day-to-day realities](#) in their own context. African business schools operate in environments characterised by high degrees of inequality and uncertainty, a lack of skills and high rates of unemployment.

Ideally, they need to do both these things if they want to deliver the best possible training for the continent's requirements.

An assessment of quality

One important way that business schools seek to demonstrate international relevance is through rankings and accreditations. These offer an [important marketing and reputational window](#) to the world. And they are widely used by global schools as stamps of quality. They are also one of the major [tools](#) employed by students in choosing where to study.

But only a handful of schools in Africa are recognised and ranked globally. The University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business, University of Stellenbosch Business School and the American University in Cairo are the only African business schools out of 86 globally that are [triple-crown accredited](#). This means they have recognition from the top three

global accreditation bodies, the Association to [Advance Collegiate Schools of Business](#), [the Association of MBAs](#), and the [European Foundation for Management Development's Quality Improvement System](#).

When it comes to rankings, only the University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business, University of Stellenbosch Business School and the Gordon Institute of Business Science University of Pretoria are recognised in the various [Financial Times rankings](#) for their offerings.

Useful benchmark or distraction from purpose?

The process of business school accreditation is rigorous and time consuming. Schools must articulate their vision and mission and relevance and impact.

Schools have to submit a lot of information and an accreditation panel will spend time at a school to inspect and ensure that it is delivering what it claims to be delivering. This process can be useful because it helps schools identify and improve on weaknesses identified.

Accreditation bodies offer a rounded assessment of schools. The three main global assessment bodies assess performance in a holistic way. Their assessment goes beyond just individual increases in salary. They take into account graduates' contribution to society, value creation and entrepreneurship.

There is a new kid on the block worth watching: the [Association of African Business Schools](#) which hopes to delve deeper into what African business schools are doing to develop the continent.

Undergoing accreditation can therefore be a highly developmental process. It can be useful as a consultancy exercise as much as – if not more than – an audit of quality standards. But the reality is that many African business schools operate with minimal resources making it challenging for them to achieve accreditation.

Rankings, by comparison, are easier to participate in but have received a lot of [criticism](#) including charges that they come with flawed methodologies, misleading information and a lack of transparency. They are also accused of [detracting from the social obligations](#) of schools. That's because they tend to place little emphasis on students' learning or societal benefits and focus almost exclusively on the short-term economic returns of their education for graduates. The rankings however, are a [criterion](#) used by potential international students when choosing which schools to apply to. They cannot be discounted.

Together, accreditation's and rankings offer African business schools a valuable way to benchmark themselves against their global peers. As Professor Jonathan Jansen, former vice-chancellor at the University of the Free State, [wrote](#) in a recent article, they can reveal areas in which a university can grow and improve on its scholarly work:

“ You never really know how good you are until you are ranked against the best. ”

Rankings and accreditation may be onerous and expensive, but if used wisely they can strengthen global credentials. At the same time they can also help business schools to hone their offerings to develop the right calibre of leadership and management to drive the development that is needed on the continent.

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