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The Face of Business Education in Africa Post-COVID-19: Gain or Loss?

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Introduction

On February 14, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 in Africa was recorded in Egypt, North Africa (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020), and by May 13, 2020, the virus had spread through all 54 sovereign African states. Following this, similar to countries in other parts of the world, almost all countries on the continent established measures aimed at curbing the spread of the virus. These included the closure of land borders, flight cancellations, travel restrictions, and school shutdowns that affected universities as well as business schools. Only a few business schools on the continent were able to transit seamlessly to online teaching as a result of several factors, which are discussed later in the chapter. For the majority, there were major disruptions to their activities as teaching effectively stopped, with negative implications both for the learners and the schools concerned. In this chapter, I discuss the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on business schools in Africa, the challenges faced by business schools, the risks and opportunities arising from the crisis, and the changes that have to occur in business schools across Africa for them to remain relevant.

Business and Management Education in Africa

Formal business education in Africa can be described as relatively recent because the predominant form by which skills for running businesses were acquired was through informal apprenticeship long established as an indigenous management practice or learning on the job. The first business school was established in the University of Pretoria, South Africa, in 1949, but across the continent, very few emerged following this until the late 1980s to early 1990s. During this period, several business schools were established across different regions in Africa, most within universities but a few others as stand-

alone business schools. By the 2010s, more business schools were being established, bringing the number of business schools on the continent to 144. The reasons for the establishment of these business schools were mainly to prepare managers for (1) the growing number of multinationals expanding into Africa following the global financial crisis of 2008/2009, which saw most countries in the developed world in a recession, and (2) the growth of numerous entrepreneurial ventures established across the continent spurred by a number of factors, including a strong entrepreneurial spirit among young Africans, a large and accessible market even within countries, and high unemployment levels. Howard Thomas, in his article “Management Education out of Africa,” states that business schools exist in several countries across Africa in different forms – state-owned and private; stand-alone business schools and schools within universities offering business and management education with traceable unique cultural practices, contexts, and values that often shape their different curricula (Thomas, 2017). This remained true at the onset of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020, when there were numerous schools on the continent – mostly African business schools but also a couple of offshoots of foreign universities.

I would classify the business schools on the continent into three broad categories: first-tier, second-tier, and third-tier business schools.

First-Tier Business Schools

Business schools in the first-tier category aspire to be global schools, and in terms of their operations and programs, they are similar to well-developed business schools that have a longer history of operations. There are a good number of such schools in South Africa and others interspersed in countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, Egypt, and Morocco in North Africa.

These schools have achieved or are in the process of achieving global accreditations, which are the hallmark of well-established schools in the developed world; seek collaborations with top global business schools; aspire to attract international faculty as well as international students; and are deemed leading schools in their home countries. Prior to 2006, there were no African business schools accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) International, and only one institution had obtained accreditation from the Association of MBAs (AMBA) and the EFMD Quality

Improvement System (EQUIS), the three of which form the top 3 global accrediting bodies. By 2020, the number of schools accredited by top global bodies had increased to 12, with 7 having two such accreditations (AACSB and AMBA) and 3 business schools achieving triple accreditations (AMBA, AACSB, and EQUIS). First-tier business schools are typically financially autonomous or semiautonomous and are usually independent of parent institutions in making decisions (Okonedo and Aluko, 2016).

Second-Tier Business Schools

Schools in the second-tier category are focused on developing managers and executives within their home countries. Typically, these schools are not financially autonomous and exist as part of schools of management or business within universities. Students and faculty in this category of schools are predominantly drawn from the home countries, and there is little or no effort given to attracting international students. Some of the schools in this category have aspirations to attain global accreditations in the medium to long term (Okonedo and Aluko, 2016).

Third-Tier Business Schools

Often referred to as the local majority, schools in the third-tier category serve local communities and exist within universities. They offer degrees in business, but many of the faculty members do not possess doctorate degrees, and the schools do not have independence in decision making. Students are almost exclusively from the home country because the focus is on preparing students to work in their respective domestic markets.

I will refer to the first-tier category as the “global few” and the second and third-tier categories as the “local plenty.” Collectively, though, these business schools provide management education to students within the continent, many of whom remain within the continent upon completion of their degree programs. There are also concerns about the number of managers being developed within these schools compared to the needs of the continent, as well as the adequacy of the curriculum to address the needs of the continent. According to a qualitative survey conducted by the African Management Initiative

(2016), only a minority of African managers at low and mid-levels are well trained. Participants in the study, which comprised educators, large businesses, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), training providers, and consultants from across Africa, highlighted poor management and a disconnect between theory and on-the-job practice as common.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Business Education in Africa

Typically, participants enroll in business schools to acquire more knowledge to function effectively as managers and executives within corporations, to effectively run their own businesses, or to attain higher degrees for career mobility.

Business schools in Africa have existed over the years with no major disruption in the sector, unlike in the United States and other developed nations, where the global financial crisis of 2008/2009 disrupted the sector and called business schools' curricula into question, given that a number of the principal actors who had a role in the lead-up to the crisis were graduates from top business schools in these countries. The COVID-19 crisis, however, was a major disruptor to the business education sector not only globally but in Africa as well.

Globally, the closure of schools across 184 countries has sent 1.5 billion students home, and this is equivalent to 87.6 percent of the world's students (Education Cannot Wait, 2020). In Africa, a 2020 survey conducted by the Mazawo Institute revealed that 72.5 percent of respondents reported interruptions in their research activities (Bayusuf et al., 2021). This is attributable to school closures, implying that only those schools that had the technology infrastructure in place were able to move programs online and continue classes.

I would classify the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on business schools under the following:

1. Limitations in access to learning
2. Increased competition
3. Effects on delivery mode
4. Faculty/Other staff limitations in the use of technology
5. Curriculum
6. Others

Limitations in Access to Learning

Almost all the first-tier schools moved, albeit at varying speeds, to adopt a combination of online and in-person instruction because prior to the pandemic, these schools had integrated digital learning into their delivery model. There were, however, challenges in some countries, even among the first-tier schools, as students were unable to access online learning as a result of limited bandwidth and connectivity, lack of access to electricity, and the high cost of data. Africa's internet penetration at the end of 2019 was 26 percent, well below the global average of 59 percent (GSM Association, 2019).

Among the other categories of business schools – second and third tier – activities were stifled by the unpreparedness of these institutions and the lack of technological infrastructure, which may be connected with inadequate funding because many of the schools get government subventions. These funding sources were affected as many countries in Africa grappled with dwindling revenues as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. In several countries, allocations to universities and publicly funded business schools were reduced. In Kenya, for example, funding to public universities was slashed in advance by \$400 million for the new financial year, which was to begin on July 1, 2020, necessitated by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the East African economy; this cut university allocations to \$1.13 billion, versus the intended \$1.53 billion that the government planned to spend on institutions earlier in the year (Nganga, 2020).

In other instances, cultural norms relating to female students being primarily responsible for domestic chores while at home affected their participation and adoption of online learning. Other problems, such as income reduction and job losses as a result of the pandemic, also contributed to students' inability to continue their learning programs.

Increased Competition

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the providers of business education were predominantly business schools in Africa. For the first-tier category of business schools providing degree programs and executive education courses, competition included foreign business schools because corporations often sponsor the programs. For second- and third-tier schools, which typically offer degree programs and are not active in the

executive education sector, competition was limited to other local universities. With the COVID-19 crisis and the exponential increase in online courses being offered by a variety of learning providers, including tech companies, universities, and consulting companies, among others, the competition changed almost overnight to include all.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, massive open online courses (MOOCs) have increased exponentially since March 2020. Coursera, edX, and FutureLearn, which were the top 3 MOOC providers, registered more users in April 2020 than in the entire 2019, with total users of 20 million, 8 million, and 4 million people, respectively (Shah, 2020). The courses that had the most engagements were Personal Development (167,000), Business (167,000), Art and Design (117,000), and Management and Leadership (115,000) (Shah, 2020). And of the many geographical locations, the following were the top 3 cities: Bangkok (Thailand), Lagos (Nigeria), and Mumbai (India) (Shah, 2020). There is also the Quantic MBA, which has been accredited by the Distance Education Accrediting Commission. This program can be completed in 11 months, comes at no cost, and is typically completed by students who pass through three different admission stages. The program is funded by companies, which pay to hire graduating students through Quantic's career network (Shah, 2020).

In June 2020, Microsoft made public its vision to upskill 25 million people across the globe before the end of March 2021 (Smith, 2020). In the Middle East and Africa (MEA), an estimated 900,000 learners have engaged with one of the 10 learning paths that include software development, sales, project management, information technology (IT), customer service, digital market, IT support, data analytics, finance, and graphics design, which are statistically proven to have the greatest number of job openings globally, pay a livable wage, and require skills that can be learned online (Microsoft News Centre, 2020). All of these opportunities have sprung up because of the education and skill deficits made evident by the COVID-19 pandemic, and together, they pose stiff competition to traditional business schools in Africa.

Furthermore, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, with visa and travel restrictions and the overall need for safety, the number of international applications to first-tier schools in Africa has been greatly affected. With the massive offering of online courses, competition is no longer limited to providers within the region because students can assess learning from any of the global providers.

Effects on Delivery Modes

Many business schools all over the world adapted online modules for their students, and this may continue beyond the pandemic. Institutions are turning to blended-delivery alternatives, with providers also seeking to reduce the adverse effects of the pandemic by making admission schedules more flexible. However, an effect of these online trends could be the huge financial implications. For example, if a top global school offers a fully online MBA program and any of the first-tier business schools in Africa has a similar offering with costs in the same range, there is a high likelihood that students will go for the global brand. Business schools in Africa therefore need a clear value proposition to attract prospective students to such programs, failing which, the revenues will be affected.

Faculty/Other Staff Limitations in the Use of Technology

Earlier, I had alluded to the issue of funding in business schools, especially those dependent on government funding. With learning expected to be delivered online or using a blended format, such schools may lack adequate funding to adapt technology in their delivery modes. In addition, faculty not versed in the use of technology will have to be trained and must embrace the use of technology in delivery. With constraints on funding, this may prove difficult for many schools to do. A change in business model may be necessary to diversify funding sources. The adoption of technology could also be advantageous to schools that wish to recruit international faculty to teach or collaborate on research, projects, and programs.

Curriculum

The curricula of schools in the region were largely similar to those of leading business schools, covering the various functional areas of business and management. Often, these were nuanced with any peculiarities in the local environment. After the global financial crisis, when business education was disrupted in some regions of the world, almost all business schools began to include courses in ethics, sustainability, and corporate governance in their curricula and course requirements.

The COVID-19 crisis, however, has brought to the fore questions about what is being taught in business schools, the relevance to the world of today, and its ability to prepare students for the world in the future. Key areas that business schools, especially those in Africa, have to grapple with are risk management, globalization, and the concept of shareholder value maximization.

Managers being prepared for work in organizations operating in Africa need to have, in addition to other skills, keen risk-management capabilities, given the risks and uncertainties in the operating environment. The COVID-19 crisis highlighted the absence of a risk-management framework in many organizations, with business continuity being threatened in many businesses that were unprepared and whose business model was not suited to cope with the situation. Risk management, scenario planning, and business continuity, especially in an emerging-market context, are things that students preparing for the world of business today and in the future have to learn. In addition, as the pandemic caused a disruption in global supply chains as a result of measures taken by governments to stem the spread of the virus, Africa's imports and exports were projected to decline by 16 percent and 8 percent for 2020 (World Trade Organization [WTO], 2020). The whole concept of globalization, long taught in business schools around the world, is being reexamined. Should this be a concept that should be taught in business schools in Africa, given that the effects of global disruption had a manifold impact on companies and countries in Africa, especially those with a heavy reliance on imported goods? For example, Nigeria's value of imports, initially pegged at NGN 1.86 trillion as of January 2020, dropped to NGN 1.13 trillion in March as a result of the pandemic (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020). This indicates that there is a need to shift from globalization to domestication. As more countries in the developed world are tending away from globalization to domestication, what should be included in the curriculum? The challenges for business schools now include determining what should be taught to prepare students for a fast-changing world affected by global issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

A look at the business school curricula across the first-tier business schools in Africa shows that the key competencies and skills required by managers and employers are still not being taught. Courses such as sustainability and social responsibility, problem solving in structured

and unstructured environments, and business analytics do not feature prominently in the curriculum. According to the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2020), the top skills required by employers in the wake of the pandemic are complex problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence, people management, and so forth. Business schools in Africa should therefore integrate these courses into their respective curricula in addition to courses on ethics and sustainability, which will ensure that students are completely grounded in business technicalities and ethics.

Agility of Business Schools

There needs to be a reflection on how the business models of our schools have to change and how we can build structures that are adaptable to changes in consumer behavior and patterns caused by crises. According to the 2021 African Economic Outlook (African Development Bank, 2021), the real gross domestic product (GDP) of Africa shrank by 2.1 percent in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, culminating in the region's first recession in 25 years. The real GDP of Africa has, however, been forecasted to increase by 3.4 percent in 2021 (African Development Bank, 2021, p. 1). Through customized and executive education offerings, business schools can play a role in affecting business executives.

Future of Business Education in Africa

As we have seen earlier, reports alluded to the African economy making a rebound in 2021. In the interim, however, the decline in African economies affected many businesses, including small to medium enterprises and large businesses, as well as student enrollment, business school funding, and curricula, and as a result, these events should ideally lead to a reorganization of business schools.

In Africa, the pandemic also provides opportunities for businesses to commit to a low-carbon economy transition as issues of climate change have become increasingly important. By paying more attention to sustainability themes in their curricula, business schools can help participants identify potential opportunities in achieving a low-carbon economy. These schools can build more collaborations with environmental agencies in order to improve the learning experience of

participants and to ensure that participants are fully prepared for the realities of the world. Overall, these actions tie into the ongoing discussions of purpose in business schools. “Purpose should not be mundane, neither should it be aspirational. It is not completely descriptive of the operations of a business or unrealistic of what the business seeks to do. It is about problem solving in order to produce profitable but lasting solutions to people and planetary problems, and not to profit from creating problems for people or planet” (Mayer, 2021, p. 888).

Conclusion

As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, business schools in Africa are facing a number of challenges, as discussed in this chapter. Consideration must be given to what has to change systematically to facilitate access to learning and develop managers who will contribute to not only the economic but also the social development of Africa. Despite these challenges, the crisis has brought forward opportunities for schools across Africa to consider their strategies with respect to their markets, their student and faculty recruitment, curricula, and partnerships in order to thrive.

Partnerships

Business schools have to consider the mode of delivery, and where online teaching is a big part of the delivery, careful thought has to be given to affordability for both the schools and the students. On the part of the schools, innovation in product offerings could be an opportunity for increased and diversified revenues that could go toward investment in technology. Partnerships could be sought with collaborators such as technology companies and other bodies to facilitate online teaching and learning. Where internet connectivity may pose barriers, what can business schools do? Overall, there is a call to work on partnerships that enable the provision of tools and the provision of bandwidth at reduced costs for institutions. For those schools that hitherto invested in brick-and-mortar resources, perhaps a shift to investment in technology may be well suited to the postpandemic era. The biggest impact and differentiator may be in those schools that invest in technology and are able to deliver education using a blended approach.

But it goes beyond acquiring the tools; from the decision makers in the school to the faculty and, in some cases, the students, the change from traditional classrooms to blended or fully virtual classrooms and learning requires a change in mindset to be embraced. Although the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of technology, there must be a concerted move to upskill faculty for virtual teaching and interaction. For the students, there has to be a change in mindset so that they can learn independently and see on-campus experience more as a way to foster interaction and networking rather than the only place learning can be achieved.

Collaboration

The COVID-19 crisis has heightened the awareness that schools in Africa have to work to attain world-class standards and relevance in their respective countries in order to attract potential students, many of whom now have a wider choice of institutions – local and international – that offer what they seek. Business schools, especially the second- and third-tier schools, may have to consider collaboration with other institutions – both within and outside Africa – to complement their strengths, as well as stronger interaction and partnerships with industry, not only to understand what skills employers are seeking in order to shape their curricula but also to improve job prospects for their graduates.

Regarding curricula, business school theories on shareholder capitalism may not be effective in the wake of COVID-19. In Africa, where income inequalities are high, should there be a different emphasis on a more inclusive society and how to achieve this? What has to change or be included in the curriculum to achieve this change in mindset? With the COVID-19 crisis, issues such as health-care provision and funding, inequalities in society, and access to learning being affected by income inequalities have highlighted the need for teaching in business schools to go beyond theories that focus on shareholder value maximization and emphasize managers' responsibilities to a broader group of stakeholders.

Especially in Africa, the need for high-level collaboration between governments, corporations, and citizens to achieve a more inclusive society has come to the fore. Business schools have to rethink their part in making this happen and should see their role as going beyond

imparting function-specific knowledge to contributing in a broader way to the development of society.

Rankings

In terms of ranking, perhaps it is time business schools in Africa give careful consideration to which particular rankings are relevant in the environment and which ones enable schools to contribute to not only the personal development of the student but also society as a whole, in addition to the economic development of the individual countries. It may be that for second- and third-tier schools that have no aspiration to be global, a focus on rankings that measure societal impact and sustainability may influence the curriculum, create awareness in students, and serve as a call to action. Such a focus could also influence the research being done in business schools that speaks to these issues in developing- or emerging-market contexts in order to uncover insights that students can learn from and embody in their management practices.

Competition

Increasingly, with education being offered by a variety of providers with attractive value propositions to learners, business schools have to address the issue of how to deal with enrollment in the face of increased competition. The value and distinctiveness of a business education and what business schools offer must be clear. The challenge for business schools in Africa may be achieving this distinctiveness in order to communicate the value to prospective students and employers. The challenge may well be, though, that in the face of reduced employment opportunities brought on by the COVID-19 crisis, business schools have to consider what can be done to persuade students to invest in a long-term degree rather than the free courses widely available from a variety of providers.

African business schools have to be able to adapt to counter the rising threats and take advantage of emerging opportunities. In doing so, the skills of agility and nimbleness will be required. In addition, a new look at the business model is required, with consideration being

given to the physical and technological infrastructure, faculty mix, and student learning. In doing this, business schools in Africa have to be ever mindful of what students are being trained for – function-specific knowledge for now or skills to thrive in an ever-changing, uncertain world of business?

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