

Africa's first win at top international business school competition

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The UCT Graduate School of Business in Cape Town has garnered another international accolade in becoming the first African business school to win the 39th annual John Molson MBA International Case Competition, often referred to as "MBA Olympics".



L to R: Jane Obree, Kate Herringer, Van Zyl van der Merwe, Rihana Hoosain, Shivani Ghai, Johannes Schueler

A team of UCT Graduate School of Business (UCT GSB) MBA students, led by senior lecturer and MBA alumnus, Johannes Schueler, has won the John Molson MBA International Case Competition, the oldest and largest MBA company analysis competition in the world.

Schueler, a senior lecturer on the MBA programme at the UCT GSB, says the competition receives many applications every year, of which only 36 schools are accepted. "The barrier for entry is high. And as the only business school from Africa, the competition gave the UCT GSB the opportunity to demonstrate its competence and strengthen its standing in the international context. I'm particularly proud of the fact that an African business school has prevailed against heavyweight competition from all over the globe. This reminds me of my favourite Mandela quote, 'It always seems impossible until it's done.'"

This year's winning team included MBA students Shivani Ghai, Van Zyl Van Der Merwe, Jane Obree, Kate Herringer and Rihana Hoosain. This is the 8th time the UCT GSB has participated in the competition.

"Our team was amazing and hardworking, but more importantly, I believe we all had a thirst," says team member, Shivani Ghai. "It had been eight years in the making and this was Africa's time to shine. We took the responsibility of representing not just our school and country, but also the entire continent very seriously."

Held annually in Montreal, Canada, the John Molson MBA International Case Competition sees hundreds of MBA students representing business schools from more than a dozen countries, compete for a first prize of CA\$10,000.

Schueler says the competition looks to encourage thinking that can transform academic knowledge into practical, applicable tools and solutions. “A key purpose of the competition is to bridge the gap between the academic and real business worlds,” he explains. The competition also leads to collaborative projects with other schools and an exchange of knowledge and expertise, Schueler believes.

The theme for this year’s competition, which took place from 6-10 January, was “The future of business”. A panel of judges made up of 300-plus senior business executives from different industries, assessed the competing teams’ abilities to analyse business cases and to come up with solutions in a set time.

Key criteria included creativity, insight, substance and plausibility of implementation of the solutions and plans submitted. A round-robin format allowed teams to analyse seven unpublished case studies, that were focused on how culture, globalisation, environmental issues, technology, the economy, and customer experience will impact business in the coming years.

The highlight of the event each year is a ‘live case’ involving a current business challenge facing a major company – which this year featured online travel agency FlightHub.

“The teams are given three hours to analyse each case using what they’ve learned while doing their MBA and then develop and submit their solutions and give a detailed plan of action to the panel. They are allowed very limited use of Microsoft Office software and no access to the Internet,” explains Schueler. “The entire exercise helps students learn how to work in teams, analyse data quickly and translate theory into practice,” he adds.

The team spent many weeks preparing for the competition by doing in-depth industry research focusing on the key dynamics in the largest industry sectors, as well as country-specific research that considers emerging market dynamics, economic strength and natural resources.

Team member Kate Herringer recalls the preparations as being very intense and focused. “The transformation I noticed in both myself and my team mates throughout the process was quite amazing. This progress was attributable not only to our team’s time and dedication, but also to the incredible patience and constructive feedback given by our coaches. It was so rewarding to see all the technical skills we learnt in our MBA programme come to life in the real world.”

“It has been a gruelling week, ending with a monumental and well-deserved victory. We are all extremely grateful and honoured for the opportunity to have represented the UCT GSB, South Africa and Africa at this prestigious event,” commented team co-coach and 2019 participant Rihana Hoosain. “I can certainly say I speak for the team when I say that this has been the highlight of my MBA, especially from a learning and development perspective.”

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