

AABS accreditation for African business schools - a new focus on impact

Issued by [UCT Graduate School of Business](#)

5 Aug 2015

The Association for African Business Schools has announced that it will be launching an all-African accreditation process that will take African business school education into the future, where impact matters.

The business schools of the future will be geared towards creating entrepreneurs and business leaders who are focused on impact and relevance rather than output - with making a difference as a primary focus.

This according to the Association for African Business Schools (AABS), presently designing a new accreditation system for business education on the continent.

"There is a real desire for African business schools to be more relevant to the African context, and to produce graduates whose work will be more impactful. It is such a shift away from what has been done before," says professor Walter Baets, director of the UCT Graduate School of Business AABS chairperson.

Accreditation is big business in the business school world with top schools around the world investing much time and energy into acquiring it - particularly from the top three: AMBA (Association of MBAs); EQUIS (from the European Foundation of Management Education) and AACSB (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools).

"It is considered a mark of distinction to have triple-crown accreditation from all three of these bodies. To date just three African business schools have achieved this - partly because it is an expensive and time consuming process and not all schools have the resources to pursue this. But we are also questioning if what they are measuring - and rewarding - is absolutely relevant or useful in an African context," Baets says.

He says an Africa-focused accreditation model will enable African business schools to shape entrepreneurial thinking advantageously for the continent's future.

"The situation in Africa is such that innovation will have to deal with very Africa specific issues," he says. "In general, we will have to be able to do more, for less, which is not the classical focus of innovation," Baets says.

Grace Mugo, Accreditation Development project manager at AABS, says the goal of the AABS accreditation system is simple, but the execution involves many layers of complex work with a variety of stakeholders.

"If you look at our mission, we are essentially seeking to advance promoting excellence in education and capacity building," she says.

When it comes to defining the criteria of impact and relevance, Mugo acknowledges this is a "daunting task".

"It will involve a great deal of research," she says. Through visits to schools, receiving feedback and assessments and collating best practices, the AABS is building a framework from which to work.

"Following the research, we are defining and scoping an accreditation system for African business schools. The end product will include a framework as well as an accreditation checklist with accompanying documented guidelines and documentation for implementing the accreditation process," Mugo says.

Corné Carolan, AABS programme director says that a focus on impact doesn't necessarily undermine profitability - and

adds that the African model should pave the way for change globally.

"Businesses exist to fill needs and make a profit doing so. Every business should focus on making a net positive difference, not only to shareholders' wealth, but also to their employees and their broader community, society and environment. This is not only an African imperative, but for every business on the planet," she says.

According to a recent AABS conference report, African business schools are likely to be more flexible because they are not rooted in centuries of European-styled education.

"The ability of business schools to innovate and be nimble is often hampered by higher education systems that are slow to embrace change and possibly value tradition over relevance. African business schools would be able to innovate uniquely the more they interact with business, government and society by acting as a facilitator to explore, introduce, debate and test ideas for the benefit of business and society," Carolan says.

So are global best practices and international accreditations still relevant? "It depends," says Carolan. "A global best practice might be a useful starting point but they could also limit creativity. Do we have the same problem the 'global' best practice is trying to address? Which part and how much of the globe was included in developing the 'global best practice'? Is there a better solution? Why limit problem solving/solutions; why not leapfrog those practices?"

"Quality is relative. Lately there is a lot of attention on Africa because people are starting to realise that we are doing a good job in Africa. Quality is not alien to Africa. However, in many cases we are customising international standards of excellence to what is applicable in Africa," Mugo adds.

"Once again, relevance will be key in this determination so as to ensure African business schools play an integral role in the development of the local economies and the African continent as a whole."

* To find out more about AABS, contact Corné Carolan on corne@aabschools.com.

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