

Don't get sidetracked

Strip away the hyperbole, the fashions and the fringe activities. The purpose of a business school is very basic, says Nick Binedell, dean of the Gordon Institute of Business Science (Gibs). It is to make businesses competitive.



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"Particularly with university business schools, there is talk of academic research, governance, sustainability, diversity and technology," he says. "These are all important and often very sexy. But there is a risk of getting sidetracked and losing focus on what we are really here for - which is to teach people how to run their businesses better."

Henley Business School SA dean Jon Foster-Pedley thinks the responsibility goes further. "We are here for a bigger purpose, to uplift the country. We send people from here to add value to their companies and therefore SA. Without skills and knowledge, we can only sink backwards into protectionism and inefficiency. We need to build businesses that not only create profits but also jobs and community and supply chains."

Or, as University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business director Walter Baets observes: "The question we should all be asking is: what value do we add to society?"

Schools used to build reputations on the shoulders of their MBA and other degree programmes. These are still important but now some consider executive education the true measure of school success. In a country like SA, there is a need for broader access to management skills.

As the accompanying tables show, there isn't much you can't learn at business school. Subjects like management, leadership, finance and strategy remain staples but it is significant that in customised programmes, companies are anxious for their managers to learn interpersonal and emotional skills.

The staples, though, are not untouched. Frik Landman, CEO of Stellenbosch University Business School's executive development company, says the emphasis in leadership is moving away from the individual towards the collective. "It's less

about leader development than about leadership development."

Despite adjusting curricula to market needs, he wonders if schools don't take too short-term a view. His school is collaborating with the university's institute for futures research to create a scenario-planning model to predict industry trends decades ahead. "It's only a blueprint at the moment," says Landman, "but instead of forward planning to 2015, shouldn't we also be looking 50 years ahead?"

Some schools have more immediate needs. Government soaks up a significant proportion of executive education but Rhodes Business School director Owen Skae is growing frustrated at the red tape that comes with it.

"The tender requirements often make it a futile exercise," he says. "For example, we must be able to show what our procurement processes are, and what proportion of our spending goes towards training and development. We are part of a university, for goodness sake. These are questions for a builder or a manufacturer."

With or without government, most schools report a sharp rise in executive education demand this year. Duke Executive Education regional MD Sharmila Chetty says the US-based school is growing both in its own right and in collaboration with local schools. Rhodes and Wits Business School (WBS) are among those that have partnered with Duke.

She says: "We are no longer seen as the SA leg of an international school but as an international school in our own right. We can help change the SA business education landscape."

WBS director Steve Bluen expects business to keep picking up as the school continues to reclaim credibility after years of inconsistent leadership and negative headlines. Executive education head Adam Gordon says: "There is a collective will in the business community for WBS to succeed."

Siegie Brownlee, CEO of the private Regenesys school in Johannesburg, says there are growing signs of clients wanting a mix of formal and informal education. Many are asking for executive education programmes with subjects offering academic credits towards degrees. "They're not looking for attendance certificates any more," she says. "They want education their managers and executives can build on."

That can only be good news, both for schools and for business. Executive education isn't a one-off programme, says Binedell. "What we want to do is teach and support at the various stages of a career. Real executive education is lifelong education."

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