

R2m boost for African case studies

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A collaboration between two of the world's top business schools will see the development of emerging market-focused business learning material that will contribute to the 'decolonisation' of the business school curriculum locally.

Teaching and learning in Africa is set to take a big step forward with the announcement last week of a major new investment into the development of African-focused business learning material.

The Harvard Business School (HBS) Alumni Club of South Africa and the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB) have each invested R1million into a case study centre that will be based at the GSB and will be dedicated to assisting academics on both sides of the Atlantic to write case studies and develop relevant teaching materials that are focused on African realities.

“What is still missing in African business schools is relevant local material, specifically cases on doing business in emerging market economies and the various challenges that this presents,” said GSB director Professor Walter Baets. He added that the GSB case study centre aims to create a library of material on emerging market business and social innovation that will be the largest of its kind on the continent.

According to Baets, the need for African business case studies and teaching materials has been on the agenda of many teaching institutions on the continent for some time. “At the recent African Academy of Management Conference in Nairobi, Kenya, there was much talk about how to go about developing local teaching materials as well as a decolonisation of the curriculum. For many, there is simply too much of a focus on Western case studies and textbooks,” he said.

Mike Thompson from the HBS Club, who is also a past graduate of the GSB, said the club was delighted to invest in this venture. “We hope this will add real value to South Africa and its future and our children’s future.”

Historically, African schools have used case studies from top universities, notably the Harvard Business School (HBS), which while they are excellent study tools, are inadequate in preparing future business leaders on the African continent.

Harvard alumnus Ewald Wessels commented, “Drilling for oil in Texas is one thing. But setting up a mine in Mpumalanga is quite another. South African leaders have to address different issues, taking into account relevant social and economic challenges — which you won’t find in a Harvard case study.”

He said the HBS Club had a vision of how this donation could be used. “We want to create a really great library of African and South African case studies to allow a whole generation of business leaders to be educated on these issues.” He said it was hoped that in 10 to 20 years, this generation would have been trained and had practised their craft with real African case studies.

Dr Linda Ronnie, UCT GSB Senior Lecturer and winner of the inaugural AABS Emerald Case Study Writing competition said that one of the reasons why the continent lacks more of its own case material is because writing cases is not an easy process.

“Case studies are not traditional research, which most academics are used to. It requires a different skills set.”

Ronnie added that the new investment will fund the appointment of a case study editor for a period of three years who will be responsible for assisting academics at the GSB to generate and publish peer-reviewed business case studies for the MBA and other postgraduate programmes. She said that in addition to providing African students with more relevant

content, the cases developed here can also be sold to business schools around the world that are eager to learn more about doing business in emerging markets.

The work of the case study centre will build on momentum at the GSB, which has seen the development of over 200 case profiles and several notable business school teaching case studies in the past few years. The Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship at the GSB has collaborated with Oxford University's Saïd Business School, Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship, the World Health Organisation and Results for Development and has written case studies on various topics ranging from impact investing in Africa, social entrepreneurship to health and education models in Africa. New teaching case studies are also being created for the Social Entrepreneurship course with funding from the World Economic Forum in partnership with Harvard Business School.

Recently a set of twelve new teaching case studies on Innovative Finance in Africa were launched; in partnership with the Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship, and were taught on the GSB Bertha Centre's Impact Investing in Africa Executive Education course. The cases feature eighteen impact enterprises and sixteen funds from eleven countries across the continent. To date, these cases represent the largest body of academic work focused on Africa that explores this emerging investment industry.

Dr François Bonnici, Director of the Bertha Centre said that the new material will advance students' understanding of the particular context and challenges for ventures with social purpose in African countries and raise the standard of business education on the continent. Furthermore, there has already been interest in the Bertha Centres case studies from several top business schools around the world including Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, New York University's Stern School of Business, Strathmore University and Oxford's Saïd Business School.

"This is an exceptional investment and a potential game-changer when it comes to business education on the African continent. Investing in local material means that African business education is where it should be when it comes to business in Africa; leading, not following," he said.

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