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Blind spots in African management education: An examination of issues deserving greater attention

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Title

Blind Spots in African Management Education: An Examination of Issues Deserving Greater Attention

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Abstract

There is reason to be optimistic about management education in Africa given the growth in number of business schools on the continent and continued efforts at raising quality. There remains room for improvement in the field, of course, and the issues and challenges that need to be tackled have been written about elsewhere (e.g. African Management Initiative (AMI), 2013; AMBA, 2015; Thomas et al., 2016). The study reported here has the more nuanced purpose of understanding the blind spots that persist in the field. These are issues that are largely ignored or receive insufficient attention because their significance is underestimated. Through a series of structured in-depth interviews with leading management educators and stakeholders, we uncover three potential blind spots to do with a lack of demand-side orientation, unequal access to management education, and the need for glocalisation. (137 words)

Keywords

African management education; blind spots; relevance; impact; equal access; glocalisation

INTRODUCTION

In the book *The Institutional Development of Business Schools (2014)*, Pettigrew stresses the importance of the international comparative perspective and method in understanding the evolution of business schools. He argues that the systematic search for similarities and differences among schools, across geography and time, sharpens our understanding of why some business schools do better than others. The book by Thomas, Lorange, and Sheth (2013), *The Business School in the Twenty-first Century*, was highlighted as an exemplar of work that provides “the most comprehensive account yet of the rise and rise of the business school and the challenges of delivering management education in the contemporary world ... They also provide the most international account yet of the variety of business school forms, identities and models throughout the world” (Pettigrew, 2014, p. 298). While this book represents laudable effort, Pettigrew notes that a deficit in the literature remains; namely, an empirical research-based understanding of the variety and evolution of business schools.

A number of studies of business schools across regions (Thomas et al., 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017) have begun to address the “continued empirical deficit” that Pettigrew saw as a glaring gap. These studies gathered data through structured interviews with business school leaders across a wide representation of schools and examined the issues and challenges faced in the past, present, and future. This has allowed for a broad comparison between European, American, Asian, and African business schools on three dimensions: institutional differences, competitive differences, and social capital differences (Thomas et al., 2016). Broadly speaking, relative to the other continents, African schools tend to have a country or regional orientation rather than an international outlook, transmit knowledge largely through vocational training, are less focused on peer reviewed, top-tier publications for research, and few are globally recognised. In addition, African business schools are far fewer in number (estimated at around 100) and are much younger.

The current paper draws on evidence derived from one of these studies on African management education (Thomas et al., 2016), but rather than looking at the broad issues and challenges that African business schools face – a topic that has been the focus of other studies – we take a different tack. Based on in-depth interviews with leaders of African business schools, including deans, rectors, vice chancellors, and a number of business leaders, we identify issues that are critical to the advancement and design of management education in Africa, but which have largely been ignored or only partially acted upon. We conceptualise these as blind spots.

Blind spots are areas that have been ignored or misinterpreted because key strategic decision makers have become biased in their perceptions or have been ‘blinded’ to essential cues or events in their industry (Gilad, Gordon, and Sudit, 1993). These warrant attention because studies have shown that blind spots lead to flawed competitive analysis (Zahra and Chaples, 1993) and reduced performance (Porter, 1980). Blind spots arise because of biased decision making (Zajac and Bazerman, 1991) often connected to managerial myopia (Tripsas and Gavetti, 2000), as well as pressure from industry for conformity. This leads to reduced innovation and the creation of a ‘macroculture’ (Abrahamson and Fombrun, 1994; Poudier and St. John, 1996) that produces and sustains potentially damaging blind spots.

We begin below with a review of recent literature that examines issues and challenges within African management education, before offering our perspective on the utility of examining blind spots. We then present the findings of our study, which reveal that the blind spots in African management education have to do with market orientation of programmes, equality of access to management education, and the global-local balance in curriculum and pedagogy. We then discuss the implications of these blind spots for what a suitable African model of management education would be. In particular, we hold these blind spots up to the lenses of the two dominant management education paradigms: namely, the Gordon/Howell-inspired MBA model and the liberal management education model, both of which have their theoretical origins in Western approaches to management education. We suggest that neither models would serve Africa’s needs

well and propose instead that a range of models be developed that take into account the different historical and cultural contexts of different countries/regions, and that adopt different delivery modes to increase the accessibility of management education.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES WITHIN AFRICAN MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

Capacity Building and Upskilling of Workers

Emerging economies, by their nature, have a greater need for business managers and leaders. This need is more acute in Africa given the potentially explosive growth – at least according to the narrative in the Economist’s cover story “Africa Rising” (2011) – that is occurring against a backdrop of management skill levels that are, as a number of studies suggest, below global standards. For instance, a management skill index developed by researchers at Stellenbosch University in Cape Town, South Africa (Steyn and Bell, 2015), indicates that the skill levels of managers were deficient on a number of dimensions, including the ability to lead change and a lack of communication among managers in operational contexts. This highlights the strong need for the upskilling of managers in the African context. Pfefferman (2013) showed that African countries have the lowest quality of management relative to global standards. More recent work by Smith and Thomas (2016) pointed out that Africa ranks lowest among regions that include Asia-Pacific, Europe, North America, and Latin America, on the Global Talent Competitiveness Index. This is an index developed by the World Economic and INSEAD that measures a country or region’s ability to attract, grow, and retain talent, as well as the level of mid-level skills (*Labour and vocational skills*) and higher-level skills (*Global knowledge skills*) available.

In addition, the path-breaking report by AMI in 2013 indicated that in order to meet the growth targets of African businesses, there is an urgent need to train and equip future generations of managers. The authors estimated that:

“Africa’s formal labour force of 111 million includes approximately 11 million managers.

To entrench the practice of good management, we need to ensure that at least 1 in 10 of them — over 1 million — are fully equipped with the knowledge needed to drive the continent’s next phase of development” (AMI, 2013, p. 4).

Clearly, there is a need to both produce managers en masse and enhance the quality of managerial skills. Business schools have an important role to play in responding to these needs, but efforts are hampered by a myriad of issues, including the woeful state of infrastructure in some countries, the lack of quality among students entering higher education, and a shortage of funds. These and other issues have been discussed by authors such as AMI (2013), Abdulai (2014), AMBA (2015) and Thomas et al. (2016).

The Need for a Management Education Ecosystem

Beyond the simple numbers game of producing enough managers, there is a need for an overarching framework to guide the development of a management education ecosystem (AMI, 2013). For example, an AMBA (2015) report identifies approximately 100 management and business schools, of which only eight are of international standard and some nations have no business schools at all. Pfefferman (2013) cites a World Economic Forum report that shows that in Sub-Saharan Africa, only 4 out of 32 countries are found to be endowed with good-quality management schools. An overarching framework could bring about a more systematic consideration of questions such as what the optimal number of business schools should be, whether a balance is needed between elite, regional, and local schools given the different objectives that these different tiers might serve, and whether more elite schools should be established to serve as role models.

Another element of the ecosystem that will need to be addressed is the shortage of faculty. Abdulai (2014) notes that because of an increase in demand for programmes, schools have ramped up capacity without a concomitant growth in faculty. In some schools, faculty with

doctorates are few in number or absent altogether. Similarly, AMBA (2015) talks about an acute faculty shortage and the difficulties in drawing faculty to the African continent due to concerns about political stability and security. Clearly, for the management education ecosystem to thrive, a more systematic approach to attracting faculty to African shores and growing a cadre of faculty with doctoral training would be helpful.

The Need for an African Model of Management Education

Abdulai (2014) notes a worrying tendency for African schools to adopt western models of management education and argues that the growth of African economies requires a stronger African focus and approach to management education. Instead, close attention should be given to the study and research of issues relevant to Africa, such as poverty and sustainable development, social entrepreneurship and innovation, and the enhancement of African management talent and resources. African schools, in his view, cannot succeed through mimicking western, whether American or European, business school models, where individualism rather than the communitarian ethos of *ubuntu* in African culture tends to hold sway.

Pfefferman (2013) similarly underscored the primacy that an African model should have. He argued that in developing countries, SMEs are the biggest contributors to employment, accounting for 80-85% of new jobs. Consequently, for business schools to make strong headway in Africa, they cannot offer the same curricula as American or European business schools whose case studies and teaching methods typically address the needs of larger local and multinational corporations.

This view is echoed in the AMBA (2015) report, which offers a similar perspective about the seeming irrelevance of western business school models in Africa. At least part of the reason many African schools are reluctant to stray too far from traditional western models lies in the background and prior training of faculty. Many of these faculty are from the West or are native African faculty who have been trained in Europe or North America and therefore have a bias

toward these models, even when their academic perspective often cannot be implemented in an African context.

It must be said, however, that in spite of the issues noted above, advances have been made in African management education, owing in no small part to leaders dedicated to advancing the field. For instance, the African Association of Business Schools (AABS) and its pioneer leaders, Nick Binedell of the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), and Enase Okonedo of Lagos Business School have been catalysts in the development of management education through their efforts in bringing African business schools together in collaborative endeavours.

Blind spots – What they are and why they are important to understand

The issues in African management education discussed in the previous section have been identified by a number of studies. Their recurrent nature in the literature, at the very least, suggests that there is some consensus on their significance. On the other hand, we understand from the vast literature on judgement and decision-making (JDM) and behavioural decision theory (Samson & Thomas, 1986; Schwenk & Thomas, 1983; Thomas, 1984) that people's intuitive judgements about problems and issues can be subject to systematic errors or biases. The perceived importance of an issue, for instance, can result from greater exposure to information pertaining to it (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). This could lead, in turn, to a homogenisation of perspectives or “dominant logics” — shared views that result from the collective experience and common mental models of those in a given group (Prahalad & Bettis, 1986). One consequence of the homogenisation of views is the creation of “blind spots” (Zajac & Bazerman, 1991). That is, they are areas that are underestimated for their significance or that therefore do not receive sufficient attention.

Hence, the intent of this study was not to ask respondents to simply identify issues and challenges in African management education. These have been written about in the popular press as well as scholarly works. Also, we believe that responses to such a question might merely reflect the biases and “dominant logics” discussed earlier. The purpose, instead, was to draw out respondents’ perspectives about issues that have not received the attention that they deserve. In other words, respondents have to break out of the confines of the common narrative about issues in African management education to identify issues they believe to be significant, but have received insufficient attention.

The motivation of this study is to raise awareness of blind spots and jump start a conversation about their importance, in the hopes that, in the longer term, momentum can be built in the wider community towards tackling them in managing business schools.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

The motivation for this paper flows from two interrelated gaps in research on business schools and management education. The first is an empirical gap that concerns the dearth of studies on the varieties of business schools around the world, including studies on management education in Africa. The second concerns the blind spots in management education. There is, in fact, no prior literature addressing blind spots in management education in Africa, nor is there an *a priori* testable theory of [African] business schools. For this reason, an exploratory, interpretive research design is adopted for our study.

Interpretive research seeks to surface the meanings ascribed to [socially constructed] phenomena (Rabinow and Sullivan, 1987). Or, as Geertz (1973, quoted in Walsham, 2006, p. 320) writes, to capture data about these social constructions: “What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to (p.

9)”. In the case of this research, the aim is to capture the interpretations given to the state of affairs in African management education by those experiencing it directly. More specifically, we focus on uncovering the socially constructed meanings (Weick, 1995) behind blind spots in African management education, held by those embedded in the context.

Interview Format

Structured interviews with 24 open-ended questions were used and these typically lasted more than two hours, providing rich insight into respondents’ thoughts and perceptions. The questions posed related to issues and events in the past, current challenges, and the likely evolution of management education going forward. (An interview schedule is available by request from the authors). In this paper, we focus on a specific question about the lessons that have not be learnt, or issues in management education that have been ignored, or only partially acted upon. This provides a mechanism for identifying blind spots, by prompting interviewees to reflect on these neglected areas within management education.

Participants

Participants were 41 leading management educators, business professionals, media representatives, and other stakeholders in management education across Africa. A substantial challenge for this research was to give voice to as many stakeholders in the various parts of the African continent as possible. Tables 1 and 2 show how our respondents were distributed across regions and countries, respectively. Table 3 shows the distribution of respondents across profession and role.

Insert Table 1 here

Insert Table 2 here

Insert Table 3 here

Data Analysis

Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.12) describe an inductive approach as one where “the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data.” We employed such an inductive approach in our analysis of the data (Creswell, 2014), with the objective of building and revealing commonly held themes in the interpretations or sensemaking of the respondents. An open coding process was used and this process is represented in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 here

Data analysis commenced with anonymizing each interview transcript and putting the transcript into a standard format. An initial reading of the interview transcripts was then conducted to familiarise ourselves with the dataset. As we noted earlier, this paper focuses on responses to a specific question about blind spots in management education. The dataset was therefore narrowed to the relevant segments of text. Following this, labeling (coding) of segments of text was conducted to elicit categories. Through multiple readings of the data and reaching agreement among the authors, 13 categories were identified. Further re-reading of the data enabled grouping these 13 categories into three overarching themes which constitute the blind spots in African management education. Please refer to Table 5 for these categories and blind spots.

RESULTS

We discuss the three blind spots here, along with specific quotations extracted from the data set to illustrate the nature and substance of each. At the end of each quote are abbreviations that indicate the region that the respondent is from and his/her profession. Please refer to Table 1 for the abbreviations used for region and Table 3 for the abbreviations used for profession.

The three blind spots are:

1. Lack of a demand-side orientation
2. Unequal access to management education
3. Need for a global-local balance

The first blind spot is the most dominant, accounting for 52% of all categories mentioned, while the remaining two were mentioned about equally often. (Please refer to Table 5 for the proportions of responses accounted for by each category and blind spot.)

Insert Table 5 here

Blind Spot 1: Lack of Demand-side Orientation

Our respondents lamented the fact that there is scant attention paid to the needs of the market; that is, to both students and businesses. Little effort is made to find out what is required by and of managers throughout Africa. One respondent put it as such:

“I will give you a typical marketer’s answer when looking at product. This is what we offer, so you buy it regardless of whether it fits you or your needs.” [SA, ME, Associate Dean 1]

The sentiment reflected in responses was that business schools are largely shaped by their university context more than by the market. There is a lackadaisical attitude towards the

managing of programme portfolios, with schools offering degrees because it is “what they have always offered”. As a consequence, there has been very little development of degree programmes and executive education, nor has there been significant changes over many years in the way in which management education is delivered.

This lack of responsiveness is also reflected in the lack of research on management practices and needs, resulting in management education that is somewhat divorced from the practice of management. Consequently, the real impact of management education on African businesses and the African economy is limited at best. The following quotes exemplify this sentiment.

“There has been scant research on management practices in Africa ... whereas we have had business schools operating in this environment over the last 30-35 years. And why was that? It’s again wanting to increase prestige by researching and teaching things that may not have an impact on the environment. So these are the things that I think we ought to have learned and perhaps done differently — research focus, curriculum development and adaptability to the environment.” [WA, ME, Dean 2]

“I think the link to the business case is important. Whatever we do in management education needs to have a business case. You need to prove how we impact business and make a difference in terms of the bottom line. And I find that that kind of thinking is not, or may not always be, present.” [SA, ME, Vice/Deputy Dean 1]

“If you’re going to learn something that is not relevant, it’s not going to add value.” [SA, ME, Dean 12]

We looked more broadly at respondents’ answers to other questions in the interview to better understand the reason for this state of affairs. Some respondents alluded to the tight reins held by the government and the university as a major contributor, which has had the undesirable consequence of fostering conservatism and bureaucracy. While some state regulation of higher education is necessary to ensure quality and confidence in the system, the view seems to be that

national governments in Africa are regulating with a heavy hand. This coupled with the fact that many business schools are part of larger state universities that do not necessarily understand the nuances of management education, has meant a stifling of the development of the field. As one respondent put it:

“... we are generally part of the state universities; obviously, they are huge organisations but generally quite conservative, bureaucratic and lacking an understanding of the nature of [a] business school.” [SA, ME, Dean 10]

This dominance of governments and universities is contrasted to the peripheral involvement of the private sector in the affairs of business schools. Typically, the state prevails while multinationals and NGOs are seen as incidental to a business school's existence. One respondent pointed out that, unlike business schools in other parts of the world where interactions with the public sector, private sector, and civil society may be generally accepted, African business schools are somewhat divorced from the world of business. This raises the fundamental question of whom management education is for and what the purpose of the business school is in Africa.

“... [where we are] in South Africa and the rest of Africa, the environment is dominated by the public sector. Only the multinationals are actually operating as businesses So one of my challenges is, am I to call myself a business school? Or am I to call myself a management school?” [SA, BP&ME, Dean/Director 1]

This view is echoed by others who bemoan the fact that businesses, in general, have done little to support the development of management, managers, and management education throughout Africa. This is seen in the following quote:

“There's also not a tendency [for] big corporates to support business schools. I think we are not seen any more as relevant or necessary — the respect and the trust in business schools has not disappeared, but has decreased. [Business] is not in the mode of giving money to business schools.” [SA, ME, Associate Dean 1]

In summary, respondents believed that one area that has been consistently overlooked is the lack of attention to the needs of the market; that is, of both students and businesses. Schools have lost sight of the need to develop programmes that are in line with market needs and to engage in research that speaks to business problems in Africa. The result is a dominant ‘business as usual’ mode of operation and a somewhat stagnant existence. This owes in part to the fact that schools operate in a highly regulated and bureaucratic environment that provides little incentive for change coupled with the fact that businesses, in contrast to the dominance of governments and universities, play but a minor role as stakeholders.

Blind Spot 2: Unequal Access to Management Education

Another issue seen as something that the field has failed to act on is the general lack of equality in access to management education in Africa. A number of reasons were cited for this – the issue of affordability, insufficient capacity, and the legacy of apartheid and racial bias.

There is a sense that it is a disservice to society when students with the potential to excel are turned away from management education because they cannot afford the fees. This sentiment is captured in the following quote:

“I’m working in a private business school but there needs to be mechanisms to help students who cannot afford to attend [because] actually they are the best students. And that’s a dilemma I face in the business school. Because if you have very good students but they can’t afford your fees, what do you do? The thing is that society loses. If they don’t get their education, we’ll have very bright crooks on the streets because they’re very sharp. So I think when the government was trying to encourage privatisation of education, one thing that was not taken into consideration is what do you do with this group who cannot afford private education and yet could contribute a lot to the economy.” [EA, ME, Vice/Deputy Dean 2]

Other respondents talked about how there is insufficient capacity at business schools at all levels, from lower-tier schools to elite schools. This lack of capacity exacerbates the problem of unequal access, since the selection process may tend to put those with limited means at a disadvantage. One respondent even suggested that increasing capacity should be viewed as duty to society:

“Leaders of major universities must contribute to the development of the educational system in Africa ... I feel like big universities should consider their capacity constraints — and build educational capacity for societal priorities such as growing the number of managers in Africa as a part of their corporate social responsibility.” [NA, ME, Dean 5]

Respondents also contrasted the diversity in Africa to the lack of diversity among those who successfully make their way through business schools, pointing out that the legacy of racial intolerance has reduced access.

“I think what should have been learned and would benefit from a much more enlightened view today — some people use the term African Renaissance — is the stupidity of racially exclusive policies in many African countries. Not only stupidity but the huge damage it caused to education and training in many African countries, setting them back by decades. Only now are we hopefully beginning to witness a reversal If only Mandela hadn’t been imprisoned. Or if only he’d been released 20 years before perhaps the creation of an atmosphere, a business school laboratory, in which equality is paramount is important.” [SA, ME, Former Dean 1]

We once again looked more broadly at interviewees’ responses in other parts of the interview to better understand the possible reasons for this unequal access to management education. With respect to affordability and capacity constraints, respondents’ answers quite clearly point to the lack of government investment and private sector support as major contributing factors. With the lack of consistent government funding, there are limited means for capacity growth and for putting in place mechanisms, such as scholarships, to ensure that tuition

cost does not become an impediment to getting an education. Businesses have, as yet, not taken an active interest in its role as stakeholder, as expressed in the comment below:

“A lot of development agencies support government and NGOs but they argue business and business schools can look after themselves, perhaps understandably so ... We need to create economies that prosper based on jobs being created by business. So I think society needs to champion the role of business as a constructive developer of wealth and jobs and not as a rent-seeking parasite.” [SA, ME, Dean 10]

With respect to the issue of racial biases resulting in unequal access, a number of comments highlighted the historical context that has led to entrenched biases in education.

“Going back more than 10 years in the past is critical to understanding the issues During the colonial and apartheid eras — if management education was even a term that was considered, it would be very limited and very circumscribed as to who is eligible for it ... During that period, [people] who were considered to have potential to move into management and leadership positions in organisations would have been essentially determined by colonial regimes or the apartheid regime. Therefore, there would have been significant race discrimination right up until probably the 1970s and in South Africa until the late 1980s. So that would limit, if you like, the profile of people who would be considered eligible for management.” [SA, ME, Former Dean 1]

In summary, respondents viewed a more egalitarian world of management education as desirable, but saw the lack of equal access as an issue that is being sidelined. In spite of the tremendous need for managers, capacity constraints mean that the path to a managerial qualification is still reserved for a small group. Black people are underrepresented in this group, as are those from a lower socioeconomic status.

Blind Spot 3: Need for a Global-local Balance

The need to impart a global perspective is seen as an imperative in today's context, as revealed in the following quote:

“With globalisation, it's very important that from very early on, people have to appreciate that we're in a global environment ... It's not just being locally relevant; you also have to have the global context in mind. I tell students when I teach, because they're always saying, 'This is not local'. I tell them 'Look, you have to also be very aware of what's happening globally because what's locally relevant will be completely outdated tomorrow'. And of course, there are good ideas that happen in global markets that would obviously apply.” [EA, ME, Vice/Deputy Dean 2]

However, the 'blind spot' that other respondents described suggest an overemphasis on 'global' at the expense of 'local'. A balance between local relevance of African management education with the importance of global awareness and relevance, they argue, needs to be sought; this balance is termed 'glocalisation'. They saw a tendency to use western (the United States and European) models of management education and to simply transpose these to the African context. So globalization exposes Africa to modes of western management education that are often incongruent with, and detached from, the immediate needs of countries across Africa.

“What I think is that we sort of mimicked what was being done when we aspired to improve what we were doing. The ways we did that was to copy exactly what was being done by Western business schools. I might say that business education is contextual and has to be contextual because the dynamics that face players in this environment are different.” [WA, ME, Dean 2]

“I think we were not good at translating — at least before we developed our own competencies — to create fresh, new knowledge. We were not good at contextualising of business models. So we would take the recipes of good Western stuff. But that works on

certain assumptions that are not present here — social assumptions, epistemological assumptions and so on.” [SA, ME, Dean 6]

We further explored the reasons for the primacy of the western model of management education. Some respondents alluded to the pressure of aligning oneself to western standards as a means of demonstrating quality. To be seen as a big-league player, so to speak, there is pressure to prove one’s credibility through participation in rankings and through gaining accreditation. These, undoubtedly, have the effect of assimilating schools into the western worldview of management education, stripping African relevance away from focus.

“I think another pressure that we feel as part of internationalisation is the pressure to become internationally accredited, to conform to AACSB and Western standards. These systems and standards certainly were not developed with Africa as any point of reference.”
[SA, ME, Dean 9]

The dilemma of having to demonstrate quality, but at the same time stay rooted in the local context is captured in the following comments:

“What is seen as excellent is a deep contextual concept that is packaged in certain standardised norms and then exported and applied to us. But we don’t have the power to resist it. Because if you want to play in the big space and you say ‘no’ to EFMD, they’ll say you’re a bad school, you’re not accredited. So, in Africa, you’re in an absolutely Catch 22 situation. If you contextualise too deeply and become more relevant, you lose your reputation.” [SA, ME, Dean 6]

The need to develop African models of management education that speak to the issues of Africa, rather than the wholesale adoption of international standards, is more forcefully argued by the following respondent:

“So accreditation has become important but now to be accredited is a totally new ball game and the rules of the game of accreditation are not necessarily what you would consider appropriate. Our constitution starts with “We the people” and we need to serve

our region first, our continent second and the world third. That's our obligation and the rules of accreditation do not necessarily match those priorities.” [SA, ME, Dean 7]

In summary, respondents saw the trend of globalization as having led to an emphasis on an international dimension in knowledge and perspectives. In the process, there is a slighting of more contextual knowledge, knowledge needed to serve the needs of Africa. The growing pressures to be a credible player in the world stage has also thrust business schools in the race for accreditations, making the adoption of western models of management education all the more inevitable. Respondents, therefore, see glocalisation as a needed counterweight and one that they feel has been largely ignored or insufficiently acted upon.

Implications of Findings for African Management Education

What we uncovered from our in-depth interviews was insightful and the issues identified are more nuanced than the broad issues written about in the literature. For example, much has been said about Africa's need for managerial talent and the significant shortage of skilled managers in the foreseeable future. “Capacity building” has been the clarion call to management education. The blind spot of “unequal access to management education” that emerged from our analysis suggests that beyond increasing the capacity of programmes in business schools, particular attention has to be paid to ensuring that access is undergirded by the principle of equal opportunity. This is non-trivial, given the legacy of racial bias, and the increasing number of private schools with fees that may be prohibitive to many. If capacity building occurs largely at the premium end of management education, there may be an exacerbation of the equality problem.

The blind spot of “lack of demand-side orientation” refers to the fact that business schools are insufficiently responsive to the market and inertia is the dominant response to changing market conditions. As we noted in our review of the literature, Abdulai (2014) and others have argued for the development of an African model of management education. The deficiency in responsiveness among business schools, one might argue, would make developing

an African model that truly reflects the needs of African countries an uphill task. On the other hand, given anticipated growth in the number of management education providers and consequently greater competitive pressures (Thomas et al., 2017), schools may find that responding to the market may no longer be a matter of choice in the future.

Finally, the “need for a global-local balance” is a counterpoint to calls for greater ‘Africanisation’ of management education. There is a sense that globalisation is here to stay and knowledge about ways of doing business outside of Africa cannot be sidelined in favour of an Africa-centric approach. This speaks to the issue of building an African model of management education and highlights the possibility that the case for it might be over-stated.

An African Model of Management Education?

The discussion above begs the question of whether there is support on the ground for an African model of management education and what such a model would look like. Abdulai (2014), in arguing for an African-centered model, said the following:

“This concept has a simple message for management theory and practice in Africa; that management education in Africa ... must reflect the African condition, realities, environment and culture. It goes further to argue that management education in Africa must develop and use African case studies, business and leadership theories, and, most important of all, folklore in the pedagogy of African management and business schools.”

We sought the views of our respondents on whether they thought an African model of management education is realistic. The responses revealed little consensus in opinion – 42% of responses fell in the “No” category, 5% in the “Yes” category, and 53% in the “Yes, if ...” category. (Please see Figure 1.) The last of these represent “Yes” responses that had qualifications and caveats that largely emphasized the need to adapt current models to the local context. For example, one respondent said:

“Today, I don’t believe in one exclusive model of management education. I do believe in models that are contextualised and take, adapt, adopt and re-contextualise tried-and-tested models elsewhere. To simply adopt, as is usually the case, does not work. But to re-contextualise and adapt is meaningful.” [SA, ME, Former Dean 1]

Insert Figure 1 here

Clearly, those who believed in a unitary African model were in the minority. Among the rest of respondents, there is an almost 50/50 split between those who rejected the notion of an African model and those who believed a balanced basic model – perhaps using Western ideas but with content that reflects the differences in the contexts and cultures across Africa – would work. Given the diversity of the continent, a range of African models of management education does hold appeal. As it stands, the current evidence from AABS and others suggests that Africa can be clustered into (at least) five sub-regions – North, South, West, Central, and East – that have quite different ways of doing business. Within these regions there is a diverse set of business schools that adopt Western models with varying degrees of contextualization to the country or region.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

There are two dominant paradigms in management education: i) the Gordon/Howell-inspired MBA model (Gordon and Howell, 1959; Mintzberg, 2004) and, ii) the liberal management education model (Colby et al., 2011; Harney and Thomas, 2013; Estad, Harney and Thomas, 2014). The former espouses a rigorous, scientific disposition toward management and consequently, the activities of business schools that adopt this paradigm emphasize the need to produce scholarly research (Thomas and Wilson, 2011). The targets of such research, often called ‘A-Journal Research’, are typically prestigious Western journals (Khurana, 2007; Pfeffer and

Fong, 2002). The liberal management education paradigm (often applied at the undergraduate level) requires the study of the humanities and a transdisciplinary approach to management education, rather than one that is narrowly focused on management skills.

These two dominant paradigms can be considered potentially damaging theoretical points of reference for African business schools. They may become a foundation for decision makers to make flawed judgements about their industry (Zajac and Bazerman, 1991; Zahra and Chaples, 1993). Business schools may seek to compete, for example, through the production of scholarly research, while narrowly perceiving or ignoring other important parts of the industry. One consequence may be the lack of meaningful impact of such schools on the businesses and organisations they purport to serve, in terms of helping to solve real world problems and equipping students with the right skills. Given the critical need for managerial skills in Africa, neither model is likely to serve it well. Instead, a more vocational, contextualised, and management-specific undergraduate model may be the appropriate approach to addressing the needs of Africa.

In the interest of adding to the debate around what an African management education model should look like, we suggest that there should be a range of models, each imbued with a sensitivity to the history, culture, and context of the country or the region. In Thomas et al. (2016), we proposed that curricula developed should have the following three key elements: (1) It should cover the basic disciplines (e.g. accounting, finance, marketing) that make up the core foundation of management, because competence in these areas transcend culture and context; (2) It should involve the study of the history, culture, and context of African nations and in particular, it should be imbued with concepts of communitarianism, including the Ubuntu philosophy, and the importance of the relationships between family, the tribal organization (the micro-nation and its languages), and the nation state, given that these concepts can form the basis of an alternative and Africa-centric version of stakeholder capitalism; (3) It should include a set of potential key topics

that are important in applying management concepts in the African context, such as value-based leadership and topics related to Africa's economic development growth imperatives.

Such models would address the three blind spots identified in our study. First, this re-sets the role and purpose of business schools so that they are no longer slavishly imitating a practically-irrelevant Western management education paradigm. As a consequence, business schools would have to develop a more sensitised demand-side orientation. Secondly, such a model would provide a global-local balance by incorporating knowledge about the historical and cultural context of Africa, alongside core, or universal, management disciplines in curricula. Finally, in proposing a range of African management education models, we are also suggesting that there can be a range in terms of the cost of delivering management education. Solutions to this may be found in technological advances where MOOCs and distance programmes have the potential to educate large numbers at a lower per capita cost, which could provide a stepping-stone towards opening-up African management education to more people than ever before.

CONCLUSION

This research has provided novel and empirically-grounded insight into the prevalent gaps – blind spots – in African management education. The lack of demand-side orientation, unequal access to management education, and the need for a global-local balance in management education are all important and unaddressed areas. We argue that these blind spots, if left unaddressed, will define and shape African management education in potentially negative ways. Specifically, business schools will fail to effectively address the pressing challenge of capacity building and upskilling of workers ready for roles as business managers and leaders. As such, African business school deans should be looking at and engaging with these issues over the next five to 10 years and they must confront directly the blind spots identified here.

We suggest that a range of African models of management education rather than a unitary model would serve Africa well. However, more research into the needs, management practices, and curricula requirements in the different African regions is needed to develop more definitive management education models that clearly specify the topics and values that should be incorporated. These models should ideally have relevance writ large, for it is with a focus on relevance that the issues identified as blind spots in our study will receive proper attention. Our work in this field is continuing and we hope to further report on the evolution of African management education in upcoming papers and reports.

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Table 1: Number and proportion of respondents by region (n=41)

Region	Number of respondents (Percentage)
Southern Africa (SA)	20 (48.8%)
East Africa (EA)	8 (19.5%)
North Africa (NA)	5 (12.2%)
West Africa (WA)	6 (14.6%)
Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)	2 (4.9%)
Total	100%

Table 2: Number of respondents by country and region

Country	East Africa	Sub-Saharan Africa	West Africa	North Africa	Southern Africa	Total
South Africa					19	19
Kenya	6					6
Senegal			2			2
Ghana			2			2
Ethiopia	2					2
Tunisia				2		2
Nigeria			2			2
Egypt				2		2
Morocco				1		1
Zambia		1				1
Tanzania		1				1
Namibia					1	1
Total	8	2	6	5	20	41

Table 3: Number and proportion of respondents by profession and role

	Number	Percentage of respondents
Management Educator (ME) - Total	33	80.5
Dean	17	41.5%
Associate Dean	5	12.2%
Lecturer/Senior Lecturer	3	7.3%
Vice/Deputy Dean	3	7.3%
Former Dean	3	7.3%
Director	1	2.4%
Provost	1	2.4%
Business Professional (BP) - Total	5	12.2%
Chairman	2	4.9%
Director	2	4.9%
Dean/Director	1	2.4%
Business Professional and Management Educator (BPME) - Total	2	4.9%
Dean/Director	2	4.9%
Media Representative (MR) - Total	1	2.4%
Publisher	1	2.4%
Total	41	100%

Table 4: Coding process in inductive analysis of interview data

Stage	a	b	c	D	e
Coding task	Initial reading of text data	Identify specific text segments related to objectives	Label the segments of text to create categories	Reduce overlap and redundancy among the categories	Create a model incorporating most important categories
Output	Many pages of text	Many segments of text	30-40 categories	15-20 categories	3-8 categories*

Adapted from Cresswell (2002, p. 266)

**Note: The blind spots discussed in this paper are the final categories arrived at in stage 'e' of the coding process.*

Table 5: Proportion of mentions for each blind spot that emerged

Categories (% mentions)	Blind spots (Percentage of respondents)
Localized/contextualized management education not developed or ignored (13%)	Lack of a demand-side orientation (52%)
Management education has not asked or addressed what the market needs – it inflexibly provides traditional degrees (8.7%)	
Fixation on incremental, scientific research, rather than addressing big issues in Africa (8.7%)	
Widespread use of western theories/books despite them needing to be translated or not translating well to the local context. (8.7%)	
Management education has not responded to management needs across all areas of management development, but especially in executive development (4.3%)	
Lack of business impact – both teaching and research are detached from the needs of businesses (4.3%)	
No concerted effort to develop a role and purpose for African business schools (4.3%)	
Lack of equality (racial, gender, and economic) in terms of who has access to education in Africa (13%)	Unequal access to management education (26%)
Insufficient capacity for a large and growing population, and concomitantly, constrained access to management education for certain segments. (8.7%)	
Reduced access due to legacy of racial intolerance. (4.3%)	
Absence of a critical mass of local faculty; reliance on foreign faculty as local academics seek opportunities in universities outside of Africa. (8.7%)	Need for global-local balance (22%)
Adoption of Western models has come at the expense of developing African management education and research. (8.7%)	
Globalization requires balancing local needs with changing global context (4.3%)	

Figure 1: Proportion of respondents who answered “no”, “yes”, and “yes, if ...” to the question,
“Is it realistic to think in terms of an “African model” for management education?”