

WHAT MBA?

This report has taken the reader from the history of the MBA in South Africa, its geographical distribution and the demographic profile of its student enrolments and academic staff, to analysing the results of assessing the quality of the MBA programmes in three areas: governance, learning programme and context. The report has offered a particularly detailed unpacking of the MBA learning programme, and moved finally to reflecting on the transformative potential of management education in South Africa, based on current teaching and learning practices at business schools.

From the analysis presented in the preceding five chapters the following points emerged:

- MBA programmes in South Africa offer important examples of good practice in the structuring of the learning programme, the introduction of a range of pedagogic experiences, and the renewal of content. There are also interesting examples of admissions being managed with the goals of equity, access and quality simultaneously in mind, and of strategic investment in academic infrastructure and resources.
- Despite enormous progress in creating access for a new generation of black and women MBA graduates, the student profile of the programmes is still largely white and male. So is the staff profile. At this level, schools are battling not only with entrenched institutional behaviours but also with enormous salary competition from both the public and private sectors.
- Most programmes show weak research production at faculty level and an undervalued place for research in the education of managers. This undermines business schools' capacity for introducing innovative practices in management in South Africa and renewing programme content.
- Commended programmes have high admission criteria, adequate forms of support for AA and RPL students, and rules of progression within the programme that cover all the functional areas of management and provide a variety of learning experiences through elective courses.
- Most schools show some form of curriculum responsiveness to society and business needs. Some schools show interesting examples of curriculum renewal and mainstreaming non-traditional courses.

The report also brings forward three areas for further debate and research:

- The limits and possibilities of distance learning, especially in its electronic form, as a medium for the development of some of the soft and hard skills expected of MBA graduates.
- The weight and form that research education should have in the MBA programme in order to keep it at the master's level.
- The optimal balance between full-time and part-time faculty, and especially between academic and non-academic faculty, to make the master's programmes innovative and relevant, and to provide a teaching and learning experience that produces the required learning outcomes.

In many senses, the production of this report has been a stimulating and challenging intellectual experience for the research team. In the process of preparing it several topical issues emerged which required both investigation and thought. Among those issues there are two that deserve some elaboration in this conclusion: the existence of a 'South African MBA', and the pressing issue of 'an MBA for what'.

There is no South African MBA, just as there is no American MBA, French MBA or Mexican MBA. There is no doubt that the contents of the functional areas of management are more or less the same the world over and that most MBA programmes use the same type of pedagogy to teach their students. What distinguishes one MBA from another is the quality of the faculty, the integration of research into teaching, the resources relied on, the admission criteria used, the areas of specialisation focused on, the variety of elective courses offered, and the programme's relationships with the world of business and the public sector.

Yet there is something that can and should differentiate the MBA taught in South Africa from those taught in Western Europe or in North America. We have argued throughout this report that the opportunities for the South African MBA programme content and research outputs to be innovative could be found in the intersection between the global and the local. Chapter 5 in particular suggested a number of areas for research and teaching which do not deviate from the accepted (international) content of the MBA but that introduce problems which are relevant and specific to management education in a country like South Africa. If the MBA programmes offered in South Africa are serious in their stated purpose of preparing managers for the country, the region, and even the continent, much more of their content has to focus on the specific realities of business and management in the developing country context. This can only take place if business schools dedicate time and resources to the production of research for curriculum renewal and for challenging old or inadequate business practices.

As regards the question of 'an MBA for what', the expansion of the MBA in the world and in South Africa is linked, as we have pointed out in this report, to a number of circumstances. Among the trends supporting the growing importance of the MBA in South

Africa is the conviction that the MBA prepares its graduates to tackle any kind of management problem. Since business efficiency is seen as a desirable and generalisable feature of all types of organisations, NGOs and governments, as well as the private sector, see in the MBA the training ground for new management cadres. This has two negative effects, one for the sector involved, the other for the MBA programmes.

Even when the inclusion of a triple bottom line of business responsibility is challenging business practices and influencing changes in management education, business purposes are considerably different from those of governments or NGOs. Even if certain business practices in regard to cost-effectiveness, reporting systems, organisational arrangements, etc. can be usefully incorporated into government department and NGOs, the philosophy that informs the running of state departments in developing countries is not the same as that which shapes business enterprises. Confusing the two in the search for efficiency might distort the function of government and NGOs in relation to society. This does not mean that it is not possible to re-orient MBAs to suit the specific needs of the third sector. Some business schools such as Harvard have special courses focused on the management of NGOs. However, the relation between MBAs and the training of government management cadres is debatable. It still needs to be established to what extent the re-orienting of the MBA towards government management training needs is possible or desirable, and what its meaning might be for the focus of schools of public administration and their relation with business schools.

From the point of view of the MBA programmes, the expectation that they will produce CEOs for multinationals and local enterprises, self-made entrepreneurs, specialist managers of specific economic sectors or industries, executive directors for NGOs, and a layer of middle and top managers for a variety of government departments might lure business schools into offering, as pointed out in this report, specialisations too thin to produce specific skills and competencies, and that undermine the core general competencies expected of MBA graduates.

More than 50 years after the opening of the first MBA in South Africa business schools are being asked to redefine their identity. Business, government, and society are making demands on them at a time when they also have to revise their standing as postgraduate programmes. How to remain faithful to the contents of a postgraduate business management programme and yet become relevant for local society is probably the greatest challenge that lies ahead.