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Africa: the management education challenge



How will the competitive environment in African management education evolve over the next 10 years? By **Howard Thomas, Michelle Lee, Lynne Thomas** and **Alex Wilson**

The research evidence for this second volume of *Africa: The Management Education Challenge* is based primarily on around 40 in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews lasting about two to three hours. The interviewees were drawn from academia, business, media and government with expertise in management education.

Their views were supplemented with many shorter, face-to-face interviews (around 80) typically lasting about an hour with younger faculty and students. Furthermore, open-ended questions were used to gain broader, in-depth consideration of the issues and time-frames – past, present, future – central to the aims of this study.

This rich interview material (over 1,000 pages and 500,000 words) was analysed and interpreted both intuitively and using qualitative approaches. From this analysis, specific quotations were identified that provided more detail about the substance of each theme or issue.

The broader aim of the study was to capture the views and sentiments of respondents on the future of management education. But in service of that it was considered important to also understand respondents' perceptions of various elements in the environment context. Thus, we begin with an examination of the competitive context, by asking respondents how they think the competitive environment in African management education will evolve in the next 10 years.

Their responses clustered around nine themes, as seen in Figure 1 (overleaf). For reasons of space the following analysis in this article focuses on the four top themes.

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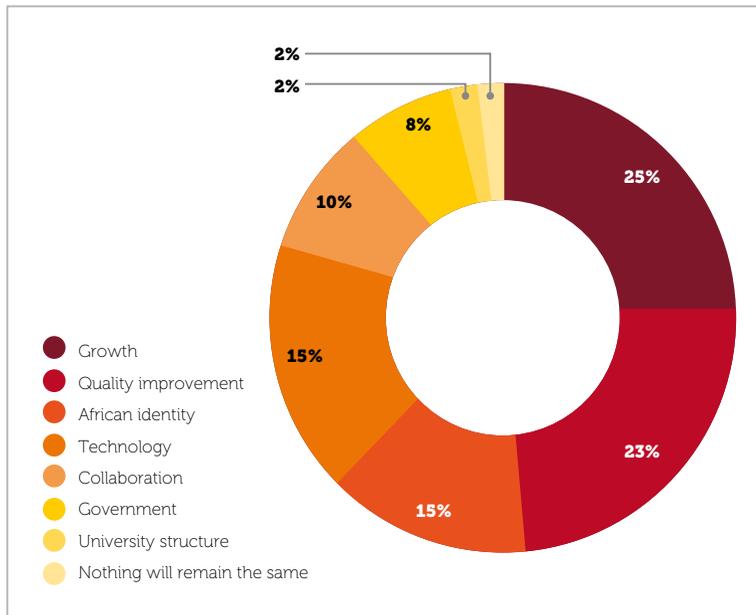


Figure 1:
Key themes in evolution of competitive context



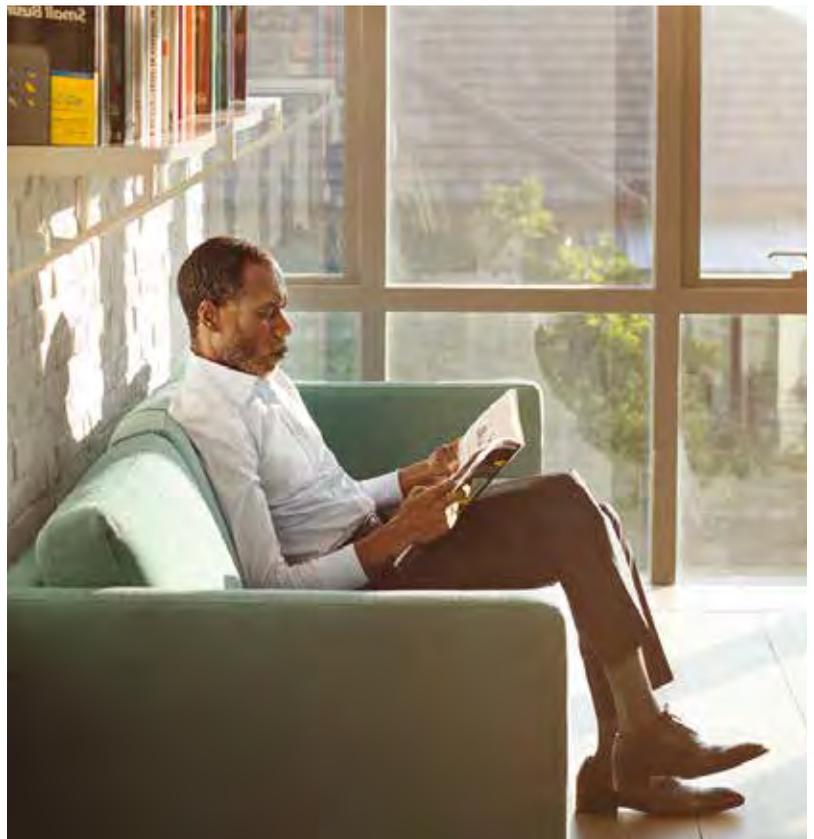
Growth

Respondents talked about growth in number of management education providers, leading to greater competitive pressures, as a likely change in the competitive context. This accounted for 25% of all responses and is the most frequently mentioned prediction.

The view is that economic development will lead to greater demand for well-trained managers, serving in turn to draw new players to fill the vacuum. New entrants are expected to range from start-ups to foreign business schools operating independently and to foreign business schools partnering with African schools.

‘It’s going to be very competitive, that I can tell you. Because for once this competition is from new entrants, this is a major factor that will make it very competitive.’

‘So I think we’re going to continue to see new entrants who are more specific in what they’re looking for. At this stage we’ve got visiting schools and international schools that are in a transitional mode. They’re not sure what they want to do; they just think that they have to be in Africa. I think what we’re going to see is that their strategy and behaviour becomes far more refined and far more nuanced over the next 10 years.’





Quality improvement

The second most common response from respondents (22.9% of all responses) was that a more competitive climate will serve as an impetus for improving the quality of education provided, both in terms of new perspectives and approaches to tackle management issues and in terms of better infrastructure to facilitate learning.

'I think the whole appreciation of management education is about to change. Because various institutions are working very hard to improve on the delivery of management education, we should be able to expand both the scope and also the depth of how to deal with management problems. We will also have new institutions coming into place in this ...field over the next 10 years.'

'I think that private education is going to come in a lot more, of course, with interesting models. It will do a lot of good and so I think it's going to be challenging for national universities. It's a different world... I think private education is going to transform options with unusual combinations of suppliers and offerings.'

For some respondents greater competition will drive an increasing focus on the practical relevance of management education, thus improving quality in that sense.

'... for the last 10 years the universities have been accused of training graduates that don't fit in the market. So we want to go to the market and ask them "What are you looking at?"; "What do you want the graduates to know ...?" And that is what we have started doing to ensure we remain relevant in the next 10-30 years.'

Quality improvement appears to be interwoven with establishing contextualised and meaningful African identities in management education, as expressed in the following quotes:

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'It's going to naturally happen that a more context-driven African management education system evolves. There's just too large a population that requires that kind of support for it to be ignored... So I think that the business schools and the management education system may be forced to make that contextual change.'

'... in the next [few] years I think that key issues will be educational quality, the further development of education in management and the addition of a strong African identity.'

However, some respondents questioned the feasibility of quality improvements, particularly if a race to fill demand leads to shoddy provision of management education.

'The top tier will continue to compete in the same way they do now because I think the resources in the next [second-tier] cluster to build and become direct competitors for the top tier are not there. I think the middle tier is the vast bulk that will grow. But the challenge of growth is whether we have the mechanisms to [sort] the quality from the "fly by night" operations. I think there's... huge growth that will take place in serving the mass market and the challenge will be to address another wave of quality concerns across that spectrum.'

25%

25% of all responses and the most frequently mentioned prediction talked about growth in number of management education providers, leading to greater competitive pressures, as a likely change in the competitive context.

African identity

Responses that were about the need to maintain or develop an African identity for management education made up 14.6% of all responses. In spite of the influx of foreign competitors, our respondents predicted that management education that responds to African needs will not diminish in importance but will in fact grow and become increasingly necessary.

'There is a strong influence [from] the Western model's... curricula but I still maintain that their approaches do not necessarily serve us well. Looking ahead in Africa over the next 10 years, I do not think many of the countries will move to a developed world ethos. We will still face the challenges that we face now - albeit getting better at confronting them. I don't want us to lose that sense of African management problems or to make the wrong assumption that we're moving to a developed world status. And therefore we must learn everything that happens there. This loses the study of African issues.'

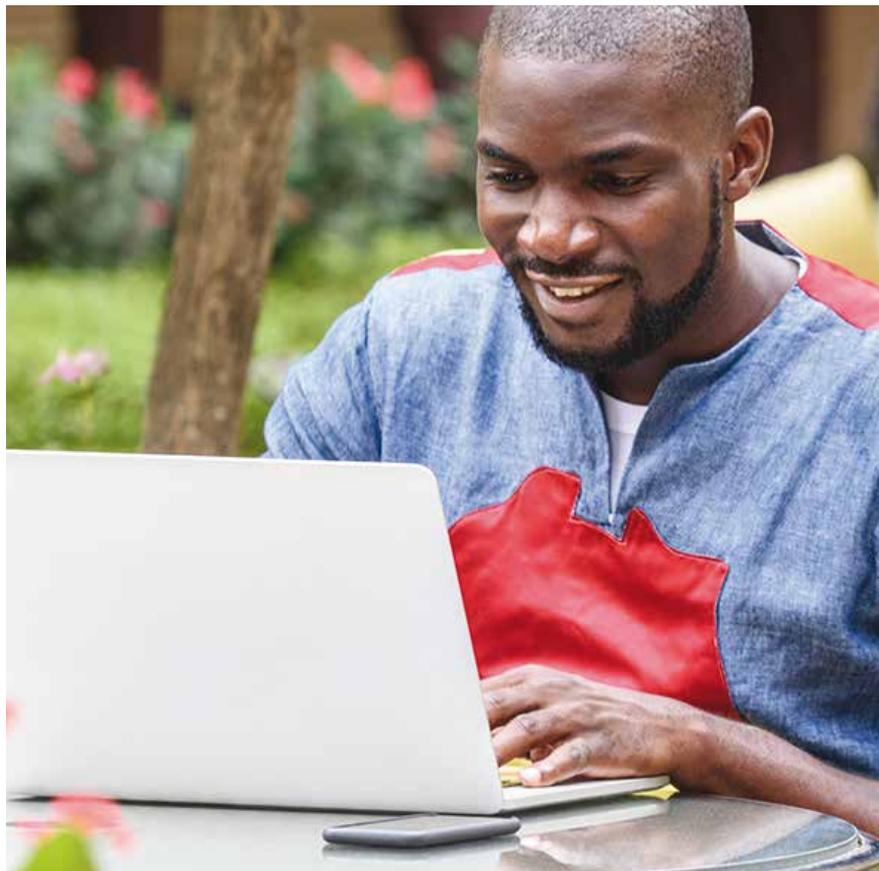
'We are really close to students. This is not only a matter of culture, this is a need because students in higher education in Africa ... need more role models. They need to have a reference point. Therefore, we have to accompany them more closely on their journey. I think this is important because it strengthens the kind of education we give them. I think we have a kind of agility in management education by adapting to important issues and situations in Africa and this is something we have to keep at the same time in our teaching.'

Respondents also stressed that foreign schools entering the market would have to 'have their feet on the ground' and demonstrate a presence and understanding of African contexts in order to transfer knowledge in a way that is meaningful:

'The other thing that I would see in the next 10, 15 years, especially from a South African point of view, is that if you want to be taken seriously in Africa, then you will have to have [your] "feet on the ground". You will have to show some staying power in that space. And stakeholders would like to see a transfer of knowledge. If you're not able to come into a country and transfer knowledge, either as a business or as a management educator or as whatever, you won't be tolerated there for too long.'

14.6%

Responses that were about the need to maintain or develop an African identity for management education made up 14.6% of all responses – respondents predicted that management education that responds to African needs will not diminish in importance but will in fact grow and become increasingly necessary





Technology

The theme of technology accounted for 14.6% of responses. Respondents spoke about how technology is likely to shape the competitive environment by increasing the number of alternative delivery modes for management education. Blended learning and distance learning were expected to be increasingly viable options available to students. The rapid growth of mobile phone technologies across the continent, in particular, is seen as an important driver for these changes.

'I think the modes of delivery are also going to change with the whole concept of e-learning – that is going to stimulate change. We're opening up this space...'

'I think one of the big changes we will see [is the use of mobile technology]. It's inevitable - It's not just a fad; it's because of distances. It will not replace face to face teaching; it cannot in terms of addressing issues of leadership development... but [it can] maybe on the quantitative side. And you will see a massive technology infrastructure happen. You will most probably see the use of mobile technology in educational delivery. You will also probably see that the competitive landscape will increase significantly.'

'In the next five years, distance education globally will become a far more important option as the first choice for many students who want to pursue management education.'

'What will change dramatically is the model, the format, because of technology. We will have more blended learning options where you do real time in class from anywhere. That will grow. That will be in a sense the solution to reach everybody with a lower-cost model...I think that will happen.'

In summary, therefore, the issues and challenges of increased growth, quality improvement, establishing an African identity, leveraging and other issues are seen as the important evolutionary change elements over the next 10 years.

This article is an edited extract from Africa: The Management Education Challenge Volume 2 by Howard Thomas, Michelle Lee, Lynne Thomas and Alex Wilson, (2017) Bingley, U.K: Emerald Publishing

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