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Does Africa Need an "African" Management Education Model?

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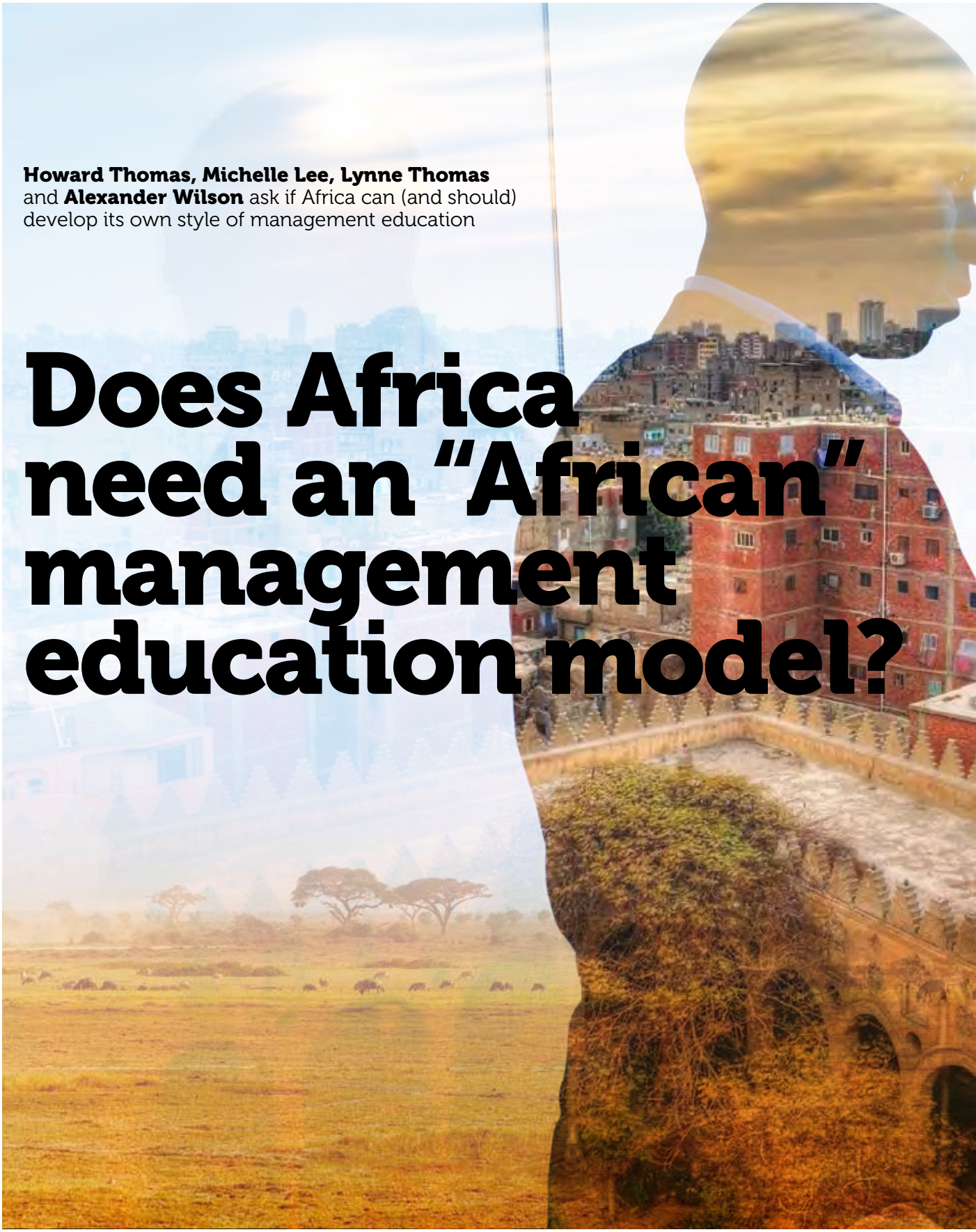
Howard Thomas, Michelle Lee, Lynne Thomas and **Alexander Wilson** ask if Africa can (and should) develop its own style of management education

Does Africa need an "African" management education model?



The African approach to management education has been shaped by a range of environmental, cultural, contextual and regional characteristics.

Africa is by any measure a massive, multi-cultural, multi-lingual continent offering the promise of significant economic growth in the longer term. The environment is characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity and, often, disruptive change. Despite this, some African states have tried to adapt and formulate a range of strategies for economic growth management and the development of international and inter-regional trading opportunities arising from globalisation.

Existing evidence suggests that African management educators have tried to adopt a pragmatic perspective that emphasises management practices and somewhat de-emphasises strong analytical rigour and the pursuit of scientific management research, which offers little immediate practical relevance for a managerial audience.

They also prefer a closer relationship with business and practice and favour a faculty role as teacher-first, offering a blend of practical experience and knowledge to students.

Only a relatively few elite schools in Africa have an orientation and resource profile that matches, or even approaches, the best American and international business schools. Yet these African schools have an international mindset that involves a strategic intent to achieve international accreditation and favourable media rankings. They stand in almost complete strategic isolation from the "rump" of basic, vocationally oriented African business schools.

However, individual countries and regions such as Southern Africa, East Africa, West Africa and francophone North Africa are all very different and do not conduct business or even run business schools in the same way. This suggests that a range of different forms of business school is to be found across Africa. Further, they should not necessarily be thought of as carbon copies of models from distinctly different contexts such as the US or Europe.

Although there are differences across Africa, there may nevertheless be some similarities that can be integrated across cultures to synthesise a 'set of features and issues' that could form an African management education model

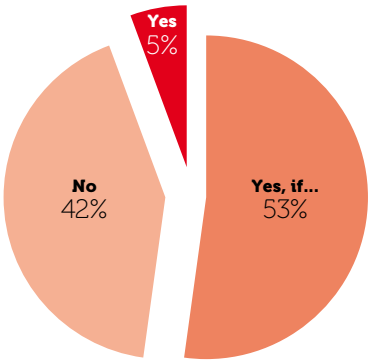


Figure 1:
Is it realistic to think in terms of an "African model" for management education?

African countries and their business schools are developing, and will certainly continue to do so, at different rates of growth. Collaboration between them will improve and partnerships with international schools may also provide a useful source of advice and expertise.

Although there are differences across Africa, there may nevertheless be some similarities that can be integrated across cultures to synthesise a "set of features and issues" that could possibly form the elements and content of an African management education model.

Is an African model of management education realistic?

As part of our research we interviewed leading management educators and stakeholders – all of whom had close associations with Africa. One question we asked them was:

Is it realistic to think in terms of an "African model" for management education? If not, what local adaptations might be appropriate? How easy might it be to develop these?

The first part of this question yielded a variety of responses from "yes", "no" and "yes, if...", the latter being the views of respondents who indicated that there could be some form of "African model" for management education if certain adaptations were made. A small minority of respondents claimed that it was realistic to think in terms of an African model for management education. Slightly less than half of respondents said that it was not realistic to conceive of an African model for management education.

Figure 1 summarises the relative strength of the various responses:

THEMES	% THEMES MENTIONED
A need to contextualise management education	26%
Management education requires adaptation	22%
Management is a universal construct	22%
Requires leadership to establish an African model	9%
The Western model is too dominant	9%
Management is a local construct	9%
The African model requires definition	3%

Figure 2:
Key themes and perceptions of an African model

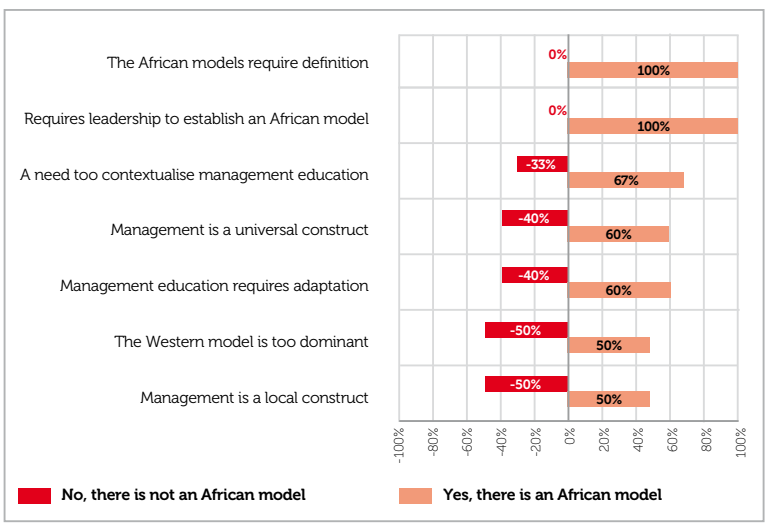


Figure 3:
Themes underpinning an African model of Management Educationl

What themes are evident in comments about an African model?

Given the roughly 50/50 split between those in favour and those arguing against an African

model, it is important to outline the main themes in the interviewees' comments and to understand their logic and rationale. These themes underlie the propositions and perspectives put forward in the discussion and are summarised in Figure 2.

The most dominant theme was whether (or not) African schools can contextualise management education to produce a national, regional or broader African model. The next theme of adaptation is closely connected with this. It captures a range of perceptions as to whether, and in what ways, management education might undergo adaptation.

As well as the context and adaptation of management education, respondents also debated whether the theory and practice of management itself is universal or locally situated, which produced further debate and conjecture about whether an African model was possible or relevant.

These themes were then mapped onto our earlier research about whether respondents thought an African model for management education was realistic. Our findings illustrate that there are some differences of opinion about the potential influence that each theme has in strengthening or diluting a distinct model for management education. The findings for each theme are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 highlights where the differences of opinion arise in the themes discussed by respondents and whether or not they contribute to an African model. For example, the notion that the African model requires further definition and needs leadership to establish it were themes closely aligned with the notion that there is (or could be) an African model. One respondent commented:

"The African business school model for me is a model that talks about social innovation, business model innovation, inclusiveness, entrepreneurship."

A need to contextualise

The most frequently discussed themes were about the need to contextualise management education given the wide diversity of cultures and experiences across Africa. However, one-third of those who mentioned contextualisation thought that there was not, or could not be, an African model, whereas two-thirds argued that there could be, if properly contextualised.

Management as a universal construct

A theme that also divided how respondents see management education was the nature of management itself; either management was perceived as universal and therefore did not need an African model or such a model would have a standard core of knowledge and require an element of contextualisation. Two-thirds of respondents discussing this theme argued the former. For example:

"I think this is not just an African but a global question. It's a global model... Finance will be finance, marketing will be marketing and so on. So the theory of marketing, I think, is across not just Africa but many other continents".

Management education requires adaptation

A further point of debate was whether, and in what ways, management education should be adapted in the African context. Again respondents were divided yes (60%) and no (40%) on whether there should be an African model for management education. Those who saw no distinct African model reasoned that another model (for example a theory-driven model of management education) could be used with some adaptation in terms of content, structure and delivery.

In contrast, other respondents argued along the lines of plural, emerging African models for management education, which will require ongoing clear identification of management education needs and substantive adaptation of current provisions.

The Western model is dominant

A further theme that emerged was centred on the role that other models of management education play in enabling or constraining the development of an African model. For example, one respondent reasoned that it is "not realistic" to have an African model when established models are so dominant:

"There are two reasons for that. First, there is the institutional academic and business power, may I call it the 'Western model'? I cannot see that that will be unseated. Second, where do the book publishers come from, in what language are the books published? English.

It could be argued, as some do, that too many differences between different regions and groups of people rule out the possibility for a coherent African mode

Where are the main offices of the corporates of this world, which are basically the focus of management? Therefore, the hegemony of that power, we can't beat. We're way too small".

Contrasting views were also apparent where respondents felt that in the face of a Western-dominated sector some variety of an African model should be seen as an aspiration.

"I think there' s an aspiration. So in terms of the aspiration, should we not as Africans, maybe not build a model but set up our own set of criteria as a beginning? So that we don't compete with the rest of the world initially but we compete with ourselves. So we actually do it on our own terms and say 'we think a good school…in Africa [would] adhere to these principles'".

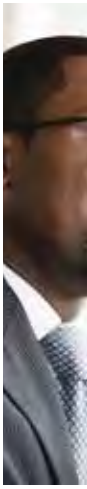
Management is a local construct

In opposition to those who argue that management is a universal construct, a smaller group of respondents contend that management is local and situational. However, from this position, respondents discussing this theme were evenly split on whether there was an African model or not. This respondent argues that too many differences between different regions and groups of people rule out the possibility for a coherent African model:

"I don't think so. This is a huge continent. Every single region or market would differ, [with] emphasis on different things. People behave differently. Some things are important in certain in areas, the nature of people differ. I think in terms of that alone, you'll have to design for the specific context".

Another respondent takes the view that re-contextualised and adapted models could form the basis of models of management education for Africa:

"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".



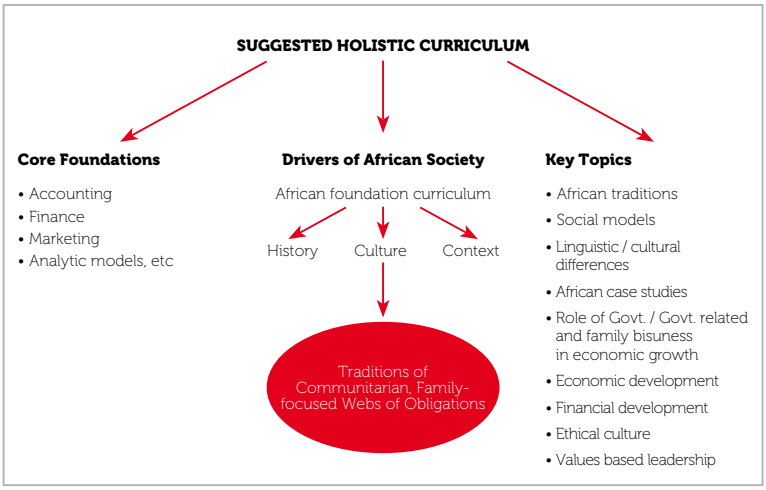


Figure 4:
A proposed African oriented curriculum

> ***"Today, I don't believe in one exclusive model of management education. To simply adopt, as is usually the case, does not work. But to re-contextualise and adapt is meaningful"***

Conclusion

So should there be an African management education model?

Clearly a very small minority of the interview panel would favour a single African management education model. The balance of responses are almost evenly split between a clear "no" and those who favour a balanced basic model – perhaps using Western ideas but with a contextualised content that reflects the differences in the contexts and cultures across Africa.

The current evidence from Association of African Business Schools (AABS) and others suggests that Africa can already be clustered into (at least) five sub-regions: North Africa, Southern Africa, West Africa, Central Africa and East Africa. They are all quite different with a range of ways of doing business. Even within regions individual countries have their own way of operating businesses.

Within these regions there is already a set of diverse business schools with, in most cases, models largely adapted and contextualised from models generated elsewhere – typically in North America or Europe. These schools have largely achieved a strategic balance between mimicking Western models but with strong country and regional factors of differentiation.

In the spirit of adding to the debate about how to build an African model, a suggested holistic business school curriculum design is proposed in Figure 4. This design argues that there is a range of "African business school models" and not a single African paradigm.

In summary, this holistic curriculum contains three key elements.

- The first covers the core foundations, which represent the key "universal" aspects of management such as the basic disciplines of accounting, finance, marketing, decision analysis and organisational behaviour.
- In the second element, the communitarianism, the ubuntu philosophy and the importance of the relationships between family, the tribal organisation (the micro-nation and its languages) and the nation state are discussed and evaluated.
- The third element provides a set of potential key topics that are important in applying management concepts in the African context. For example, the study of leadership theories may require knowledge of previous successes and failures of leadership.

This may lead to a focus on values-based leadership and a thorough discussion of the role of ethical principles and culture in governance. In addition, given the economic growth imperatives in Africa, economics and finance courses, for example, may need a greater focus on issues and principles of economic and financial development that are critical in macro-economic management.

Note that this model is presented with a few suggestions about structure and some curriculum illustrations in order to create further debate about appropriate topics and models and to promote even more research about the needs, management practices and curricula requirements in an African context in which greater economic collaboration and integration between African countries may be essential.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Howard Thomas is Distinguished Term Professor of Strategic Management and Management Education Director, Academic Strategy and Management Education Unit, Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University. Professor Thomas is internationally recognised as a leading expert in the field of strategic management. He is the author, co-author or editor of many acclaimed management books, including the *Handbook of Strategy and Management* (2001), *Strategy: Analysis and Practice* (2005) and *Strategic Leadership in the Business School* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Professor Michelle Lee is Associate Professor of Marketing (Education) and Academic Director (Accreditation) at the Lee Kong Chian School of Business at Singapore Management University. Her main research focus is on the more passive or unconscious influences of memory on consumer behaviour.

Lynne Thomas is a co-author of this and numerous other works including *Promises Fulfilled and Unfulfilled in Management Education* (2013).

Dr Alexander Wilson is Lecturer in Strategy at Loughborough University, UK. Previously he worked as a research fellow in strategic management at Warwick Business School, UK, examining the evolution and development of management education, teaching and research and the role of business schools globally. He has held visiting fellowships at Singapore Management University (2011, 2012 & 2013). His doctoral research at Warwick Business School examined the strategic adoption of technology and organisational change.