

# Insight



#### WHAT IT MEANS

- > Offers the only compulsory global module in SA
- > Adds in-depth knowledge of different economies

## What is on offer focuses on imparting practical and relevant experience

**An effective MBA** offers more than the knowledge and disciplines required to run a business. It should also provide practical and relevant experience-based business and personal leadership skills, and challenge your world view on a variety of issues.

Professor Nick Binedell, founding director of the Gordon Institute of Business Science, says the GIBS MBA programme takes cognisance of the fact that today's leaders, and those of tomorrow, can no longer afford to be complacent.

Rapidly evolving technology and innovation are increasingly shaping companies' growth strategies and leaders need to possess a deep understanding of these as part of their visionary thinking. Added to that is the ability to think creatively, possess an intensity and passion for delivery that's matched by an eye for detail and the ability to adapt. First-hand exposure to different economies has also become a must.

"It's no good looking at growth from a distance. You have to experience first-hand what economies are doing and the

effect that is having on citizens," he says.

And this is what the GIBS MBA offers. A two-year degree that's delivered by a highly-qualified, world-class faculty, the GIBS MBA is the only one in SA that offers a compulsory global module.

Says academic director Shireen Chengu: "The global aspect of our curriculum is an integral part of the rigorous MBA programme. A compulsory global module forms part of each student's studies and this dimension adds in-depth knowledge of different economies to their experience. They gain a different perspective after their two weeks of immersion in either an Asian or the US economy."

In the second year of study, students are given the opportunity to gain direct high-level exposure to the economic, business and social environment of other countries to compare them with SA. Students visit successful local and multinational firms in various countries. Their observations and feedback are an integral part of their final-year assessment. This also affords the opportunity to experience

firsthand the cultures that make the countries unique, learn about global best practice and translate their learning back into their own companies.

Says Binedell: "The programme enables them to reflect on the SA economy in comparison to others. The compulsory global module also assists in the realisation that there are many ways to compete. Delegates can use their findings to capitalise on their companies' existing strengths, while being energised on an individual level."

This year's compulsory global module included visits to China, Brazil and the US. So what can SA learn from different business environments?

Brazil is one of the destinations of the compulsory global module for several reasons. The country has traditionally enjoyed close ties with SA; and like SA, it is also an emerging economy whose growth in the past few years has made it alluring. In terms of competitiveness, the two are also not that far apart. According to the Global Competitiveness Report, Brazil ranks 64th and SA 55th.

Common challenges faced by the two countries include crime and the widening gap between the rich and poor. However, working in Brazil's favour is the common identity of its people, regardless of race,

and the shared vision of its government and the private sector, which is to align today's commercial needs with those of tomorrow to build a sustainable Brazil, says senior lecturer Nicola Kleyn.

The South American country's focus at the moment is to build its own energy resources in recognition of predictions that one of the wars in future will be the war for energy. This, says Kleyn, is distinctive of Brazilians' ability to think systematically and in a sustainable way.

Similar observations have also been made about China. The key focus of the visit to this country was getting an in-depth look and personal experience of China's biggest achievement — its success in setting a vision and getting a (very large) population to buy into it, says Dr Martyn Davies, senior lecturer and head of the Asia Centre at the business school.

One of SA's major trade partners, China's investments in Africa have more than tripled in the past five years, which raises a question. Do we seek to compete or collaborate with Chinese business in the immediate region, which has become SA's commercial sphere of interest?

To better engage with the Asian country's "state capitalist", Davies says it is imperative that the state and private sector form a stronger bond to project a more co-ordinated and focused diplomacy in Africa.

"In SA, there's a huge disconnect between the state and business. In the Chinese case, there is a strong correlation that's built on trust. This has resulted in the success of China," he says.

In just 10 years, Chinese companies have grown to make up 37% of the Fortune 500 companies, a phenomenon that's unprecedented. Credit should also go to the Chinese government's focus on building a highly educated workforce and a strong work ethic among its people.

"China is about vision," says Davies. "It's about government setting a vision and getting an extremely large population to buy into it — something that is lacking in Africa and Latin America."

Students visiting the US were exposed to how the country is managing its road to recovery and the

overall revival of its economy. The module also looked at the emergence of new trends from America's core competency — innovation and technology.

Dr Peter Tobin, who accompanied stu-

dents visiting the US west coast, says the objective of this year's trip was "to challenge delegates to think innovatively about the SA economy and compare cultural differences".

Students who participated described their overall experience as "unrelenting" in relation to the size, speed and choice of everything they had seen. There is a total

focus on customers and competition, everything is questioned and held up to scrutiny. There is also a strong focus on education, little tolerance for mediocrity and excuses, and an unlimited self-belief,

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— NICK BINEDELL

which is something that South Africans could look at in order to establish a stronger identity among themselves.

In terms of its standing as a leader in technology and innovation, students witnessed why the US is far from losing the race. Venture capitalism and the rise of social networking and collaborations are just some of the trends that will shape businesses' strategies in years to come. An increasing number of companies in the US are also going green, a trend that has become an imperative. Company cultures are also changing. Failure is now celebrated, with companies such as networking equipment supplier Cisco tolerating a failure rate of up to 25%, says senior lecturer Dr Albert Wöcke, a published author on the topics of international business and organisational behaviour.

"They believe it's better to have someone who's failed because he's a lesser risk than someone who's never failed," he says.

As Binedell says, there are many models around the world that are influencing and shaping economies. Today's business leader cannot just look at or be familiar with just one. What the GIBS MBA promises, he says, is to give those who embark on it a thorough understanding of the SA model, that of a hybrid economy, how it's applied in the global context, with the aim of preparing the business leader to know and be able to foresee what it would take to guarantee country competitiveness long-term. ■

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