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MBA

More than just a **career enhancement**

An MBA is often seen as essential for aspirant managers to boost their chances of climbing the corporate ladder and as a solid foundation for those intent on going solo. However, there is a growing realisation that the relevance of an MBA cuts across many sectors of society.

Andile Makholwa investigated.

MBA graduates are no longer found only in corporates. Increasingly, they are found in civic organisations, government, entrepreneurial ventures and family businesses.

Pushing the shift is – among other things – the changing discourse between all the actors who have an impact on the economy. Not so long ago, business tended to have an upper hand on economic

matters, with government expected to create the rules and an enabling environment for the private sector to determine the course.

These days, there is talk of environmental sustainability. Stakeholders such as labour, and also civic organisations, are increasingly playing a key role in how companies are governed as well as how they go about doing their business.

The world is reinvigorating itself. The focus on profits alone has brought a lot of problems for our

world today, and there is a dire need for leaders within communities and NPOs to emerge, influence and have an impact on governments, corporates and the world economy.

This dynamic environment has opened new avenues for MBA graduates who would like to apply their skills set beyond the private sector.

Likewise, not-for-profit organisations (NPOs) are also recognising that in today's competitive climate a more business-like

way is the key to securing funds and delivering results.

A recent report in the UK's *The Guardian* newspaper named Oxfam and Unesco as some of the international NPOs that have been recruiting MBA graduates.

It quotes an expert who says when a charity organisation appoints an MBA it gets an accountant, an economist, a planner and a marketer all rolled into one.

Closer to home, Lynette Chen, CEO of the Nepad Business Foundation, recounts a similar experience. She recently hired an MBA graduate whose thesis was on Nepad, an NPO whose main aim is the economic development of the African continent.

She says of the graduate: "The skills he's brought into the organisation have been incredible. He's led us into managing our projects more effectively."

Chen lauds the graduate, who previously worked for one of the country's big consulting firms, as also having been valuable in strategy and research.

NPOs often do not have resources to cover all operating positions. An MBA graduate generally has the capacity to step in and fulfil that wide scope.

The Nepad Business Foundation is but one of the many NPOs that hire MBA graduates. State agencies such as the Safety and Security Sector Education and Training Authority (SASSETA) and Financial & Fiscal Commission have also in the past been graced with MBA graduates in their ranks. In fact, the SA government absorbs a fair number of MBA graduates.

Sandra Burmeister, CEO of executive recruitment agency Amrop Landelahni, says parastatals also compete for the limited pool of MBA graduates.

She says: "MBA graduates will always be in demand, provided the candidate has practical management experience and a track-record of delivering outstanding performance, as well as analytical skills and a good grasp of strategic issues. To be of real value, the MBA must be supported by leadership qualities such as flexibility and the ability to handle ambiguity in an increasingly volatile world."

More and more MBA graduates are also specifically choosing to work for NPOs.

Mignon Hardie is one of them. She is a trustee of the FunDza Literacy Trust, which seeks to promote literacy across the continent. She was lured into community work by her desire to do something that would have a lasting effect on people.

Hardie, a University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB) alumnus, says: "I wanted to do something that would make a difference in somebody's life."

This new trend is challenging business schools to continuously refine their MBA programmes in order to cater for this growing need.

Prof Frikkie Herbst, head of the MBA programme at the USB, says distinguishing the USB MBA is its focus on personal leadership development.

Through the MBA's Personal Leadership Development Journey, students are impelled to think about themselves in a leadership position.

It gives them tools to manage themselves, people and processes in a complex organisation.

Students are challenged to assess old ways of doing and thinking about the world. They are put in difficult and stressful situations, and asked to manage complex tasks.

It is this focus on personal leadership development that has made Yanic Smit, another USB MBA graduate, a better leader and entrepreneur.

Instead of joining a big company after completing her MBA, she says her skills are better utilised in nurturing a small business – a marketing consultancy she runs.

She says the skills she acquired from the programme are universal – they can be applied in both the public and private spheres. She says the programme has helped her cope better with pressure. She likes the small classes and team work sessions. She says modules on Leadership, Finance or Business in Society equip students with tools that can be applied in personal situations.

"To succeed as a leader, it's not about how much you know, but about how well you work with people," says Smit, who has significant management experience in big corporations.

Critical about an MBA is that it gives candidates an overall grasp of the business world. Courses cover all aspects of business ranging from sales and marketing to HR and finance. It provides a holistic base to enable aspirant managers to have a broad understanding of business, which they can apply in any type of organisation, anywhere in the world. **a**

