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UCT's unique Executive MBA ranked the best in Africa

The University of Cape Town (UCT) Graduate School of Business's (GSB) Executive MBA (EMBA) programme has been named the best in Africa and rated in the top 50 worldwide in the 2019 Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) Global EMBA Rankings.

The ranking recognises the stature of the degree, said GSB acting director Professor Kosheek Sewchurran, describing the school's EMBA as a "one of a kind" programme that exposes students to different ways of viewing the world. "We are producing graduates who are solving the complex problems of our times," he said.

One of the fastest growing postgraduate degrees at UCT, the GSB's EMBA programme is known for its focus on the practice of management and leadership, rather than on traditional training in business functions.

The prestigious QS ranking uses a methodology that combines input from thought leaders in business and management, assesses each business school's reputation among academics and global employers, and takes the demographics of the EMBA cohort and other programme-specific indicators into account.

"We've really pushed the boundaries of what business education can be. In a sense we have been the pedagogical equivalent of a venture capitalist – investing in our own ideas to build a degree that is truly distinctive," Professor Sewchurran said.

He lauded the honour as a team effort, explaining that the EMBA depends on a strong mix of academics, practitioners and professional support staff, along with talented students, to function effectively. "We can lay claim to being the only true practice degree in Africa. Managing is an embodied experience and can be overwhelming. To help students navigate this they need more than theory.

"The reality is that managers don't operate on a plane removed from the world around them, where they have all the answers and can employ abstract, rational thinking to lay out their options and pick the best. They are constantly in situations where they have limited agency and that require ongoing adjustments rather than predesigned plans. This requires wisdom and you can't teach that – it only comes through practice."

EMBA alumnus Paxton Anderson said that the degree offers "a more experiential, emergent style of thinking, and exposes students to different ways of viewing the world".

“Often this shift in perspective or a process of questioning closely held beliefs can lead to creative entrepreneurial breakthroughs.”

Many EMBA alumni have gone on to run successful businesses across Africa, notably in areas which require managing complexity in highly innovative sectors. They include Phathizwe Malinga, chief executive of SqwidNet, the licensed network operator for Sigfox in South Africa and a subsidiary of Dark Fibre Africa.

Professor Sewchurran explained that becoming a leader and strategy practitioner in complexity requires a change in being, doing and knowing. Accordingly, the EMBA focuses on character development as a foundation before adding more technical skills.

“We have focused on disclosing new worlds and opening strategy as opposed to trying to simplify the world through theories,” he said, adding that coming to grips with the lived experience of disharmony and complexity is a critical skill for leaders in disruptive and uncertain times.

“The EMBA challenges students with the realities of leading in a complex world. To navigate this world, they need to be able to reflect on their context and who they are, to make sense of where they have come from and step boldly towards the future.”

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