

Going the distance in Africa

Edinburgh Business School is launching one of the largest MBA scholarship schemes in the region, writes **Sue Blaine**

Although Malawian university administrator Martha Sambani has only completed one module of her MBA through the Edinburgh Business School's distance learning programme, she says she is already benefiting from her new-found knowledge.

It is something she would not have been able to do without a scholarship.

Edinburgh Business School, the Graduate School of Business of Heriot-Watt University in Scotland, will officially launch the African Scholarship Programme in Johannesburg on Wednesday at an event at which African activist politician Graça Machel is to speak.

The programme is believed to be the biggest scholarship scheme offered by a UK university in Africa. Over the next five years 250 African students – 50 students each year – will receive full scholarships.

Keith Lumsden, director, says Edinburgh Business School has been active in Africa for 20 years. "To celebrate this milestone we wanted to establish an initiative to promote lifelong learning across the continent," he says.

The first 38 scholarship students from 14 African countries recently began the programme. Ms Sambani plans to use her MBA to help develop the University of Malawi's move from state to commercial funding.

"Our university lacks proper administrative and financial management skills due to lack of qualified personnel," she says. "Above all, I want to see a change in terms of university financial performance and accountability."

The Edinburgh Business School scholarship programme is run in partnership with the Canon Collins Trust, founded by anti-apartheid activist Canon Collins. Several women scholarship students, including Ms Sambani, will also receive mentoring under the Graça Machel mentoring programme, which provides disadvantaged African women with access to higher education. Ms Sambani will also receive training in public speaking, negotiation and workplace ethics.

The business education distance



Martha Sambani in Malawi is already benefiting from her new-found knowledge

Eldson Chagara

learning market is a thriving one and Edinburgh Business School delivers one of the world's largest online MBA programmes. It has 8,500 active students worldwide – 2,199 of these are in Africa – and 12,500 alumni (1,187 in Africa). Africa is not Edinburgh's largest market. Thirty per cent of its students are in the Americas, 25 per cent in Europe, 15 per cent in the Middle East and a further 10 per cent in Asia.

Other large distance-learning providers include the University of Leicester, with more than 7,000 students, the Open University Business School, with approximately 5,200 students, and U21Global, with 4,000 students a year.

The flexibility of distance learning programmes is one of the key attractions for participants. For Ms Sambani, 35, who is responsible for the welfare of her seven siblings following the death of her parents, the programme allows her to obtain the business education she wants, without having to take money away from her siblings' education.

"I can't afford to [spend money on my own education], I still have to pay school fees and buy food... [Edin-

burgh] is like my angel," she says.

Alick Kitchin, business development director at Edinburgh Business School, says the school specifically designed the MBA to be flexible. "From day one it was for working people. It's not one to do if you have just graduated and are not working yet... We're not particularly concerned about [graduates'] knowledge being overtaken. These are people skills and understanding the economic environment. They are pretty enduring," he says.

All Edinburgh's students in Africa study online, but in countries where the school has approved a partner institution students can also have face-to-face instruction.

Students can communicate with academic staff via the internet, but do not have to be online for long periods because once the work is downloaded it can be studied off line, says Mel Sturmheit, Edinburgh Business School's Southern Africa regional manager. This is important in Africa she points out, where internet access can be both expensive and intermittent.

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