

# Potential African leaders of the future given a helping hand

**Hilary Wilce** reports on Edinburgh Business School's ambitious outreach programme

**T**his year's successful South African World Cup gave the world a new view of a continent that has long been seen as a black hole for business enterprise and economic development. And not before time. Many African countries are now enjoying average growth rates of more than 5 per cent. The mobile phone is revolutionising banking and communications, new investors are coming forward, millions more children are in school, and in most countries poverty rates are declining steadily.

But burgeoning economies desperately need well-trained leaders to shape and guide them, and higher-level business education opportunities can be hard for aspirant Africans to find and fund.

Step in Edinburgh Business School, at Heriot-Watt University, which has long had links with Africa and which this autumn launched what it claims is the largest scholarship programme offered by a UK university in Africa. Over the next five years, 250 people will receive full scholarships to study for a distance-learning MBA. Thirteen students have completed their first module and a further 25 have recently started. Eventually, the school expects about 50 students a year to be in its programme.

Chipo Shonhiwa, 38, from Zimbabwe, a renewable energy research scientist at the Scientific and Industrial Research and Development Centre in Harare, intends to use her qualification to start an energy services company, making "cost-effective solar water heaters and installing biodigesters". She says: "I want to reduce the burden that women and girls face in collecting firewood for heating and cooking purposes. This would also greatly reduce indoor air pollution that is occurring now from the use of traditional biomass fuel - wood, crop and animal residue. Water heaters could also be used in towns and cities to reduce dependence on the national grid electricity."

Shonhiwa works full-time and goes home to look after her two children before turning to her studies for the evening. She works from hard copies of material sent from Edinburgh and uses the internet at work for online research and discussions with fellow students. As a veteran of long-distance study - she has done postgraduate courses online run by the Lund University in Sweden - she knows how to balance work, family and studying. But she says: "I feel grateful for my fees being paid, since it was not going to be possible to do these studies without a scholarship."

Martha Sambani, 33, from Malawi, who works as an administrative officer at the University of Malawi, plans to use her qualification to help guide the university's transition from state to commercial funding. "Our university lacks proper administrative and financial management skills, due

to lack of qualified personnel. I want to see a change in terms of university financial performance and accountability, and this will be my greatest and first assignment to accomplish as soon as I qualify."

Her job and helping to look after her seven siblings make studying a challenge. "I work eight hours a day and go to church on Saturday, so I work Sunday, and at nights I get up at 2am and study until 5am, but in our workplace they are encouraging us to have an MBA, even though the government has no money to support us, so it is wonderful to have the fees paid. And this qualification is comprehensive. It is different from the MBA offered here in Malawi, and eye-opening. I know I will get a promotion because of this, so although it can be difficult to study, it is worth it."

Sambani is among a number of women scholarship winners who have been selected for the Graça Machel Mentoring Programme, devised by the charitable Canon Collins Trust, on the request of Graça Machel, the wife of Nelson Mandela, who has long championed women's education and advancement in Africa. The programme supports women who have received scholarships from a variety of institutions by allocating them mentors to help them make the most of their opportunities for themselves and their communities.

"By providing access to distance-learning MBAs, Edinburgh Business School is contributing to the development of entrepreneurialism at local level, which is vital to the economic health of our continent," says Machel. "As part of a regional network of women leaders, the scholars will be supported and mentored throughout their careers, enabling them to ensure the voice of rural women is heard and heeded at the highest levels of government, business, universities and NGOs."

Edinburgh Business School launched its programmes in Africa 20 years ago and ran a centre in Johannesburg until legislative changes made it impossible for foreign institutions to teach in the country. "We have great experience in, and knowledge of, Africa," says Alick Kitchin, the school's business development director, who says there are 1,200 alumni across Africa who have studied at the business school and there are 2,000 active students in Africa. The school works with Canon Collins Trust, he says, to vet candidates "so we know people have the ability to cope and are going to use their MBA for a good purpose". The students are charged a small but significant amount to take their exams, "because if we are setting up an exam centre in some remote part of Africa, we need to be sure people are going to turn up."

The first group of students has come mainly from countries in southern and eastern Africa, but now students are coming from other parts of the continent, and the scheme covers all of sub-Saharan Africa.



Graça Machel, Nelson Mandela's wife, at the Johannesburg launch of Edinburgh Business School's scholarship scheme GAVIN BLOK