

USIU plots a big dream for its business school

By Nick Wachira



Dean Kashorda and Professor Low: "Africa is in an academic sense very isolated."

For those business students who have in the past dreaded the prospect of fighting that nagging afternoon nap as the finance professor drones on in class, a new learning experience is on the way.

The School of Business at USIU will this year start using case studies that are based on local companies to teach a selection of 20 courses in strategic management, finance and information technology.

Though USIU is not going to abandon the tutorial, where a professor lectures to a group of students, Meoli Kashorda, an Associate Professor of Information Systems and Dean of the School of Business, USIU Africa, says introducing the case study teaching method will enhance the learning experience.

Under the case study system, the professor moderates class discussions of a practical business situation. Experimentation and diversity of opinion is tolerated here.

Take for instance, a course in strategic management offered to MBA students at USIU. Under the new teaching system, students will not just be taught textbook theories, but they will also gain practical experience discussing how Kenya Airways and KLM went about sealing a strategic

alliance. This is one of the cases that will be developed by USIU's faculty.

"Our intention is to gradually increase the use of cases," says Kashorda. "Initially, we shall cover 30 per cent of the curriculum and expand this in time. We want to use active case teaching and business simulation in our graduate programmes."

USIU's business education program is one of the biggest in Kenya with 300 MBA students and 1,800 undergraduates. At least, 75 per cent of the majors in the university take classes at the business school.

In a country where the standard of business education has fallen significantly — especially in poorly funded public universities — this initiative, which is being funded by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) is most welcome.

It will bring together institutions like USIU and the top 30 global business schools as ranked by *Business Week* magazine under the banner of the Global Business School Network (GBSN).

The harshest criticism that has been leveled against Kenyan business schools is that they are poorly funded. In the public universities — which admits the best students — the business schools have been unable attract top-notch professors.

This has limited the ability of the schools to carry out their research missions or develop local and relevant teaching material. As brain drain has continued to hit local public universities, students have continued to get a raw deal because their professors resorted to recycling lecture notes and using textbook examples.

This turn of events has faded the allure of local business degrees among employers because they find that the students are not adequately trained. It has not helped that the schools have continued losing touch with industry due to the fact that the faculty is both not actively engaged in research and the placement offices are weak.

Lack of teaching cases based on African business situations is also a source of major concern at top business schools in the US and Europe.

"Africa is in an academic sense very isolated," says Murray B. Low, an Associate Professor at Columbia University in New York City and Executive Director at the Eugene M. Lang Centre for Entrepreneurship, who is mentoring USIU as it develops local cases for the GBSN program.

"From my point of view, I teach an entrepreneurship course at Columbia Business School that is over-subscribed," says Professor Low. "But despite the huge interest from students, there is very little material on entrepreneurship in Africa. This is a case based class."

He says that the few cases that professors can find only tell the story from the focus of foreign investors doing business in Africa.

"The only way you can correct this situation is by coming here and writing the proper cases," says Professor Low. That is why he jumped at the chance to work with USIU to gain a first hand experience about business in Africa.

Though winning a place in USIU's business school is not as cutthroat and prestigious as being admitted to the faculties of commerce at the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University, this perception is changing fast in favour of the underdog private school.

USIU is considered to be miles ahead in terms of facilities, teaching (with lecturers moonlighting from public universities) and especially in job placement.

The latest initiative — which USIU is pioneering in Africa, is expected to raise the school's competitive edge.

"One thing that already distinguishes our MBA brand in Kenya is that we integrate a lot of technology in the teaching process," says Kashorda.

But despite all the noble intentions of developing local teaching material, Kashorda has in the past found his hands tied first because he did not have a big budget for such an initiative and a big faculty to do so. Then there were technical limitations that come with the fact that Kenya does not have a huge skill base for writing teaching case studies. When the GBSN program was advertised locally in 2004, it came as a godsend for Kashorda's team.

"It all started with an internal process, at a strategic planning meeting," says Kashorda. "We identified a weakness in developing local teaching material. We needed to move from using examples from textbooks. We want a situation where we are connected with local businesses."

According to J. Michael Graglia, the Projects Officer at IFC and the coordinator for the GBSN, USIU was very quick to respond to the initiative and demonstrated serious commitment.

The University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University did not even attempt to bid for the project despite being invited.

"There is a tremendous demand for locally relevant cases," says Graglia. "Every B-School in Africa complains about limited supply of cases."

Under the GBSN initiative, high ranking schools like Harvard Business School, Columbia, London Business School and many others have agreed to co-operate with Universities like USIU to boost the quality of management education.

"The core element of this project will be the mentoring between experienced case writing faculty at Global Business Schools and aspiring case writers in Africa," says Graglia.

This initiative has been supported by the IFC to boost the training of skilled managers.

"In response to rising demand for skilled managers to support Africa's growing private sector," says Graglia, "Business school programs have proliferated in recent years throughout the continent.

Most of these new programs depend on textbooks and course materials produced by western markets. While these materials may be useful in building global business skills, they are often only partially relevant to conditions in African markets."

USIU was the first school chosen to host the case writing centre for Africa in 2004. The cases are expected to be distributed for use in other business schools in Africa. The program has since expanded to other countries in East, West and South Africa.

"In Kenya, we are building capacity to write cases and in South Africa we are developing a case teaching workshop," says Graglia.

USIU is initially expected to develop eight East Africa based teaching cases immediately. The project aims at producing 24 cases. Some of the companies that have been targeted include: Bidco, Safaricom, Makini School (A Columbia case already exists), Avenue Health Care, E-Sokoni, Kenya Pipeline, Co-operative Bank of Kenya, Standard Chartered Bank Kenya and Kenya Airways.

Last year, some members of the USIU faculty attended a case writing workshop at Harvard Business School.