



Opinion Piece

The Value of Research for African Business

Building Wealth through Wisdom and Why Rigorous Research Matters for Africa's Economic Future

By Robin Drennan

Our world is undergoing change at an ever-increasing rate, propelled by both natural and anthropogenic forces. The African business environment in particular is being buffeted by multiple, interlinked crises from climate change and pandemics to rising inequality, food insecurity and the energy transition. Concurrently, disruptive technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), biotechnology and digital platforms are reshaping how we live, work and conduct business. In this complex environment, governments, corporations and communities constantly face high-stakes decisions. As S. M. Mbuguah and D. K. Gichuki (2024) observe, humanity today contends with the simultaneous imperatives of renewable energy, sustainable cities, food-system resilience and biodiversity conservation.

In such a rapidly shifting world, building a sustainable and effective business enterprise is far more than routine. These tectonic forces reshape how people and enterprises compete and cooperate across domains such as security, trade and resource-allocation and Africa, and South Africa in particular, must respond with agility. By agility I mean the organisational capacity to adapt quickly and deftly to change whether that change is driven by emerging technology, shifting customer demands, market disruption or unforeseen global events.

But this leads to two pivotal questions. First: do we possess the capacity, here and now, to respond, adapt and even thrive in such a changing environment? And second perhaps deeper: is mere responsiveness sufficient? Or, to put this another way, can we be agile enough to respond to all the many and complex changes a business may face? Is agility alone truly enough?

Agility is only one part of the equation. The more challenging issue is knowing which way to turn and how to respond particularly when time to deliberate is limited and the margin for error minimal. The analogy of the seagoing oil-tanker is apt: given the need to avoid collision, can it steer away fast enough and, given multiple hazards (icebergs, shipping lanes, sandbanks), which course should it choose?

The answer lies in research. By research I mean the rigorous, systematic investigation of natural and human phenomena through empirical methods with the goal of establishing facts and drawing new conclusions. As O. P. Ekrokpe, U. Jayawickrama and C. Butun (2025) argue in their scoping review of AI in SMEs, research helps business decision-making in contexts previously shrouded in uncertainty.

Research supplies data, insight and innovation to address today's major societal issues. It paves the way for responsible innovation, guiding how we deploy new technologies ethically and effectively. It provides credible evidence to underpin changes to policy, investment and social-programme design. It helps societies navigate automation, new industries and digital risk. In the absence of rigorous research and the knowledge it yields, business decisions risk becoming wasteful, unjust even harmful.

When applied to business, research underpins an organisation's capacity to remain competitive and to solve its own internal challenges. It becomes essential for creating a future that balances the triple bottom line of people, planet and prosperity. And today, more than ever, research matters because the world is changing faster,

becoming more complex and confronting challenges that demand evidence-based, interdisciplinary solutions (Mbuguah & Gichuki, 2024).

Given this imperative, where better to conduct such research than at the Wits Business School (WBS)? According to the University of the Witwatersrand (2023), our institutional purpose is to "make a positive impact on society through creating and advancing global knowledge and nurturing graduates who lead with integrity." Within this 103-year-old research-intensive institution, the School's strategic research focus areas include: (i) climate change, sustainability and energy security; (ii) social justice and inequality; (iii) technologies for societal development; (iv) the future of work and the economy; and (v) better healthcare for all.

Within that framework the WBS concentrate on critical themes such as digital business, energy, finance and economics, business innovation and entrepreneurship, business management, and philanthropy and social investment. Through knowledge production in the form of peer-reviewed publications and accessible intellectual contributions the School strives to make a difference in the business landscape of South Africa and across the continent. Faculty collaborate with industry leaders, community organisations and other scholars to co-create knowledge that increases organisational agility and reduces decision-making risk. And this impact is amplified by the graduates, who acquire research skills and apply them in the marketplace. WBS, in short, is "For Good" (WBS, 2025).

Pathways and strategic choices

To translate research into business value in Africa, I suggest three inter-locking pathways: **advance, integrate, and institutionalise**.

Advance: First, we must deepen the research base. Businesses and academic institutions need to invest in longitudinal studies, regional data collection and context-sensitive research. Generic global frameworks do not always map onto African contexts, so we need home-grown inquiry. For example, SMEs in Africa face distinct challenges of digital infrastructure, market fragmentation and informal regulation. Research that uncovers these dynamics will allow businesses to develop tailored strategies rather than borrowing entirely external solutions. The Metanomics theme discussed in this journal and the empirical review by Ekrokpe et al. (2025) on AI in SMEs underscores how understanding the local ecology matters to decision-making.

Integrate: Second, there must be tighter integration of research outcomes into business practice. It is not enough to simply publish findings organisations must embed research outcomes into strategic planning, risk management, innovation pipelines and culture. This means creating mechanisms for knowledge-translation: from faculty working with enterprise, to business schools delivering executive education, to boards receiving evidence-briefs. Companies must act as co-creators of research, not just recipients. This integration supports agility with direction it moves beyond reacting to change and towards anticipating change.

Institutionalise: Third, the ecosystem of research-driven business must become institutionalised. This involves cultivating a culture that values research, building sustained funding streams, strengthening governance of research-practice partnerships, and developing performance metrics that reward research-informed decision-making. In the African context this also means engaging public policy and regulatory frameworks governments must recognise that business competitiveness is linked to research infrastructure. Business schools like WBS can act as hubs, connecting academia, industry and government around shared knowledge architectures. Key options for business leaders

Key options for business leaders

Business executives and policy-makers in Africa face hard choices. I identify three core options:

1. **Reactive agility** investing only in readiness to respond to change, without deeper research capacity. This option is affordable in the short term but limited: organisations may move fast, but without clarity on which way to turn and why.

2. **Research-informed agility** building internal or partnered research capacity to generate actionable insights. Here businesses become proactive: they collect data, monitor trends, test scenarios, and embed findings into strategy. This option is more costly but delivers stronger resilience and strategic positioning.
3. **Research-driven transformation** businesses and ecosystems that position research at their core. This is the most ambitious pathway and transforms firms into learning organisations, turns research into innovation, and links business strategy to regional, national and continental development goals. It carries the highest investment and the longest horizon, but also the highest potential for sustained competitive advantage.

My view is clear: while reactive agility may suffice in the short-term, it is inadequate for the scale and speed of change facing African business today. Research-informed agility is the pragmatic next step for most firms. But the long-term aspiration must be research-driven transformation not just to survive change, but to help shape and lead it.

Moving forward

To operationalise these options, business schools, industry associations and governmental bodies need to partner around three enablers: **capacity, connectivity and culture**.

- **Capacity:** Strengthening research capabilities in universities and business schools; training executives in research literacy; allocating budget for internal research units or partnerships.
- **Connectivity:** Building networks between business, academia and government; creating open data platforms for African enterprise; establishing research-business laboratories that link insights to action.
- **Culture:** Cultivating an organisational mindset that views research not as an academic luxury, but as a strategic asset. This means rewarding evidence-based decisions, celebrating research-informed innovation and accepting that insight generation is a continuous process.

In sum, the value of research for African business cannot be overstated. It is the compass by which organisations navigate uncertain seas not merely agile in motion, but wise in direction. At a time when Africa must accelerate its economic transformation while managing complex global and local dynamics, research becomes not a luxury but a business imperative. The Wits Business School, embedded in a research-intensive university and grounded in Africa's development context, is ideally placed to catalyse this agenda.

Business leaders, academics and policy makers must therefore commit to the pathway of research-informed, if not research-driven, business strategy. The cost of inertia is too high. The payoff is not only competitive advantage for firms, but shared prosperity for societies. We must steer decisively and with insight into the future.

References

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Dr. Robin Drennan, a distinguished South African chemist and research leader, retired as Research Director at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg at the end of 2025, after impactful research career spanning more than a decade. Holding a PhD in Physical Chemistry from Rhodes University, his academic work explored pyrotechnic reactions via thermal analysis. Earlier, he advanced applied research at AECI and CSIR, and managed programs at the National Research Foundation. Drennan's innovative ITC system streamlined Wits' research publication processes, earning him the 2017 SARIMA Distinguished Contribution Award. With 48 citations across four publications, he championed interdisciplinary research ecosystems.