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Opinion Piece

Beyond the Buzzwords: Decolonising AI Education in African Business Schools

African business schools must reimagine AI education through language, ethics, and indigenous innovation before the digital divide becomes irreversible

By Leigh Anne Naicker

Artificial intelligence is no longer on the horizon. It is embedded in procurement systems, customer experience design, regulatory compliance, and logistics optimisation. From how credit is scored in Nigeria to how procurement systems operate in Kenya or customer experience platforms run in South Africa; AI now dictates efficiency, access, and advantage. Yet, African business schools still treat AI education as peripheral, often housing it in optional modules or short courses rather than embedding it within the core curriculum. There needs to be a shift toward ethical, innovative and socially responsive leadership; this cannot emerge from learning programmes that are disconnected from digital realities. Africa's digital future is being shaped without its languages, its business environments, or its contextual realities taking centre stage. Despite this reality, African business schools remain slow to interrogate what an indigenous AI curriculum should look like. AI remains an occasional buzzword in guest lectures or optional modules geared towards technologists, rather than a core transversal capability to be embedded across disciplines. Such omission is no longer tenable. Generative AI is fundamentally a communication technology. Its value in business lies not just in automation but in meaning-making. The question is no longer whether business schools should teach AI but what kind of AI should be taught, to whom, and in what language.

Reimagining the Curriculum

Drawing on Marshall McLuhan's media theory that the medium shapes the message Africa's exclusion from dominant AI training datasets must be treated as a pedagogical crisis, not just a technological one. Business schools are strategically placed to intervene. Graduates of MBA and executive programmes become the decision-makers in procurement, logistics, and product design. If their understanding of AI is imported uncritically, their strategic decisions will be too. Several African universities are rethinking their teaching models by embedding AI within systems thinking, entrepreneurship, and ethical debate frameworks, while simultaneously taking practical steps to integrate locally relevant, sustainability-focused learning into their curricula. At Strathmore University Business School in Nairobi, for example, students have participated in collaborative projects on waste management and circular economy solutions that engage community stakeholders and industry partners. These initiatives enhance student engagement and connect entrepreneurship education with the city's environmental and governance realities. In Ghana, similar collaborations between universities, training centres, and small businesses are emerging to build capacity in digital innovation and artificial intelligence, including the development of context-sensitive customer service and data management tools. Together, such

examples show how locally grounded partnerships and applied learning projects can operationalise more inclusive and context-aware approaches to AI and innovation education in Africa. These efforts begin to show what decolonised practice might look like in action, but they remain rare and often optional. To move from rhetoric to reality, decolonising AI curricula must mean operationalising contextual mechanisms. Assessment rubrics can operationalise decolonised, locally relevant practices by explicitly incorporating African languages and cultural contexts. For example, rubrics tailored to regional norms can include descriptors reflecting indigenous knowledge systems, local competencies, and cultural expressions, thereby ensuring fairer evaluation. Developing assessment tools in African languages, such as isiZulu or isiXhosa, with criteria aligned to cultural and socio-economic realities, enhances inclusivity. Co-teaching with linguists and cultural experts ensures accuracy and cultural sensitivity, capturing nuanced performance. Implementing real-world projects such as procurement case labs with local SMEs can further embed decolonised knowledge. Regularly assessing and refining rubrics based on student feedback fosters ongoing relevance. These mechanisms operationalise the ideals of decolonised curricula, transforming rhetoric into tangible, practical actions.

Meaning-Making Through Language

Meaning-making begins with language. Teaching AI only in English excludes millions from participation and reinforces existing epistemic hierarchies. Prompt engineering is not neutral; it encodes value judgements about who defines knowledge. A simple example: an English-language prompt may return financial models that assume Western consumer behaviours. In contrast, a Kiswahili prompt may surface community-based lending models that better capture African realities. These linguistic differences underscore the importance of making cultural and linguistic inclusion a central component of curriculum design.

Policy Alignment and Opportunity

There is strong policy support for such transformation. The African Union's Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020–2030) advocates for homegrown innovation, inclusive digital economies, and robust digital governance capacity. Similarly, South Africa's AI and Data Policy Framework (2024) emphasise innovation, local data sovereignty, and the development of governance skills. The approach proposed here directly supports these outcomes by enhancing local innovation capacity and digital governance skills (see African Union's Digital Transformation Strategy (2020–2030) (AU DTS); SA AI Framework 2024).

The Road Ahead

Business education can no longer confine AI to the domain of data scientists. It must become central to how future African managers understand markets, manage people, and govern technologies. The classroom must be both a site of resistance and readiness, where algorithms are interrogated and their local consequences are understood.

What Business Schools Can Do Next Week

1. Create multidisciplinary teaching teams pairing linguists, sociologists, and local entrepreneurs to co-design modules that foreground African languages, informal sector use cases, and contextual prompting strategies.

2. Embed assessment rubrics for multilingual prompting and contextual analysis.

3. Establish professional development programmes on AI pedagogy and digital ethics for faculty.

4. Integrate AI into all core business modules, not as a standalone subject. Finance, marketing, HR, and supply chain can each include AI literacy outcomes.

5. Leverage innovation clusters and regional business networks to create challenge-based learning opportunities.

Curriculum transformation is not merely an academic exercise. It is an ethical imperative. As algorithms increasingly mediate access to credit, jobs, and public goods, African business graduates must become co-creators, not consumers, of digital systems. The continent needs empowered business graduates who challenge the systems that marginalise them by prompting for meaning in languages the world has yet to digitise. The next generation of African business leaders cannot inherit outdated models. They deserve more than incremental change; they need transformative action now.

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