

In conversation with...

Morris Mthombeni

Professor Morris Mthombeni, dean of the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) at the University of Pretoria, talks to *Ambition* editor **Colette Doyle** about managing dilemmas in a post-complexity world, turning the Global South's numerous challenges to your advantage and nurturing students to become humane-centred leaders

Tell us a little bit about your background and how you came to take up the role at GIBS

"Before taking up my initial faculty role at GIBS in 2014, I had a substantial career in the financial services industry. I held a number of senior leadership roles that gave me the opportunity to gain experience in the insurance, investment and banking sectors across Southern Africa, as well as in the UK, the Middle East and India.

"While on sabbatical, I started a PhD at GIBS and, within a year, was subsequently recruited as a faculty member of the strategy department. I rationalised that a faculty role would complement my journey as a late-career doctoral student. The senior leadership team seemed to have other ideas, however, as indicated by my rapid ascent, which culminated in my appointment as interim dean in 2020 and then as dean proper in 2022."

What have been the highlights of your career?

"Teaching on the MBA programme as one of the lead faculty members; refreshing the programme's core strategy course; leading the development and implementation of our specialist master's in corporate strategy; and driving the internationalisation of GIBS faculty.

"I also need to mention contributing to the positioning of GIBS as a world-class, responsible business education provider, as evidenced by our three global accreditations and the premier African accreditation. Over the four years since I took on the role of dean, we have been accredited

and re-accredited respectively by AMBA, AABS, AACSB and EQUIS, with the latter beginning with an initial three-year accreditation in 2022, followed by a five-year accreditation in 2025. Beyond these institutional-level highlights, I have had the privilege of interacting with local and global leaders on a continuous basis, enabling me to be part of a number of events that have shaped our society."

Do you believe that in the 21st century, with the rise of alternative providers such as LinkedIn and Coursera, the MBA is still able to stand out and distinguish itself in the marketplace?

"Alternative providers are responding to an important business educational need in society, but they are not fulfilling it in the same manner as traditional MBA providers such as business schools. Crucially, the MBA qualification has long ceased to be homogenous and MBAs are designed to prepare specialists for general management roles, but do so in a wide variety of ways. The multiple paths are made possible through differences in curricula and pedagogical approaches.

"This heterogenous characteristic of the MBA qualification is central to its appeal and resilience. Those business schools that ensure the relevance and resonance of their MBA programmes, through continuous improvement at the intersection of theory and practice, will continue to distinguish themselves from alternative providers of business education."