

# AABS ACCREDITATION WHITE PAPER AABS ACCREDITATION UNVEILED A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND UNIQUENESS

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International accreditation plays a pivotal role in ensuring quality, relevance, and excellence in business higher education (BHE) across Africa and worldwide. In today's highly competitive BHE landscape, the quest for excellence and global recognition has become paramount for business schools worldwide; Africa is no exception. As BHE institutions strive to provide high-quality programs that prepare future managers and leaders to make an impact in a dynamic and rapidly evolving world, international accreditations business have emerged as a vital measure of institutional quality, credibility, and relevance. When bestowed by reputable accrediting bodies, accreditations serve as powerful endorsements of an institution's commitment to meeting rigorous academic standards and best practices. They are often looked at as a seal of quality, validating that the accredited institution/program has gone through a rigorous process of external peer review based on predefined quality standards and principles and is meeting the expected requirements.

The benefits of international accreditations extend beyond mere validation or recognition. Accredited BHE institutions gain competitive advantages in attracting a diverse pool of promising local and international students, high-caliber faculty, and reputable employers, and in building stronger relationships with industry partners. Accreditations enhance the institution's reputation nationally, regionally, and globally, positioning it as a preferred destination for aspiring business professionals seeking globally recognized qualifications and better placement opportunities. Moreover, by fostering international recognition, they enable fruitful partnerships and collaborations with reputable institutions around the world in areas such as faculty and student exchanges, research, and joint initiatives. These important benefits nurture a rich, impactful, and diverse educational environment, fostering relevance, global perspectives, and crosscultural learning experiences.

More importantly, accreditation processes typically involve in-depth self-assessment, peer review, and ongoing monitoring and follow-up. These processes encourage BHE institutions to engage in and promote a culture of continuous improvement. Through accreditation, as well as the workshops, conferences, and other capacity-building and networking opportunities provided by accrediting bodies, BHE institutions receive valuable feedback, recommendations, and new

insight to further enhance their portfolio of programs and training, delivery methods, as well as operations and institutional practices. This focus on change, adaptation, and continuous improvement helps BHE institutions stay at the forefront of business education by maintaining relevance and responsiveness to changing industry needs and education quality standards and best practices.

In the early stages, African BHE institutions primarily considered key international accrediting bodies for guidance and validation. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB; www.aacsb.edu), the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD, www.efmdglobal. org) and the Association of MBAs (AMBA, www. associationofmbas.com) were the first international organizations to influence accreditation practices in Africa. These three leading international accrediting bodies were joined in 2005 by the Association of African Business Schools (AABS, www.aabschools.com). While initially focusing on capacity building and networking, AABS later expanded its scope to include an accreditation process that benchmarks African BHE institutions against rigorous standards and criteria adapted to the African context and taking into consideration its continental idiosyncrasies.

The main purpose of this white paper is to provide an overview of the AABS Accreditation standards and criteria as well as a headline comparative analysis between AABS Accreditation and other international accreditations available for African BHE institutions. The ultimate objective is to help African BHE institutions understand the main commonalities and differences between the options available to them and to help them in their quest for the accreditation(s) that best serve(s) their strategic needs and agenda.

### **AABS Accreditation: Standards and Criteria**

The AABS Accreditation was launched in 2018. Since its inception, it has been designed as an African accreditation system to recognize Africa-based BHE institutions offering excellent programs that are particularly relevant and responsive to the needs of their societies. These institutions must demonstrate their relevance and significance by showing the impact they make on their immediate and larger environments. Thus, relevance to the African context and impact on Africa are two vital principles of AABS Accreditation: the third being sustainability.

As foundational guiding principles of the AABS Accreditation, relevance, impact, and sustainability are considered as cross-cutting dimensions. In this sense, not only do they represent three of the eleven standards on which AABS Accreditation is based, but they are also embedded in all the other eight standards reflecting the institution's resources and operations, its portfolio of programs, and its connections with various stakeholders. Figure 1 depicts the eleven AABS Accreditation standards.

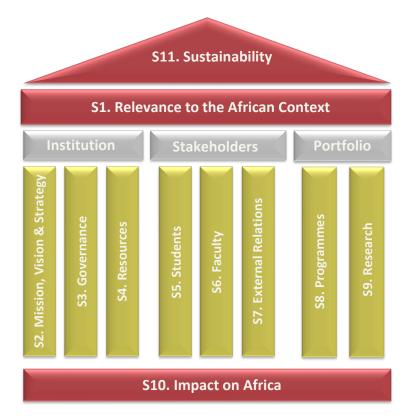


Figure 1. AABS Accreditation Standards

Relevance to the African context (Standard 1) is meant to allow the institution to demonstrate its awareness and understanding of its local, regional, and global operating environment and provide evidence of how its vision, mission, strategy, partnerships, and portfolio of programs and research are developed in response to the needs, challenges and opportunities of this environment.

The next three standards, mission, vision, and strategy (Standard 2), governance (Standard 3), and resources (Standard 4), focus on the quality of the institution. Evidence shall be demonstrated that the school has a clear vision, mission, and strategies that reflect the role the institution intends to play within its local context, has implemented the right governing structures, and possesses adequate

financial and non-financial resources to properly and responsibly deliver its mission.

The following standards on students (Standard 5), faculty (Standard 6), and external relations (Standard 7) focus on the institution's relationships with its main stakeholder groups. The next two standards on programs (Standard 8) and research (Standard 9) are viewed together as the institution's portfolio. Through these standards, the institution demonstrates the quality of what it has to offer to the academic and business communities and society in general. Like other standards, the institution is expected to demonstrate that its academic and non-academic programs are developed, and its research conducted, in response to the environment it serves and to their African communities.

Impact on Africa (Standard 10) comes next to allow the institution to summarize all of the evidence and highlight the important contribution it is making to Africa's development. As per the AABS Accreditation philosophy, this chapter is the ultimate proof of excellence for BHE institutions operating in Africa. Finally, sustainability (Standard 11) concludes the AABS Accreditation standards by providing the institution with an opportunity to reflect on and show evidence of the sustainability of its plans, operations, and activities in the short and long run.<sup>1</sup>

# AABS Accreditation versus other International Accreditations

Besides the AABS Accreditation, the AACSB, EFMD, and AMBA represent the main international accreditation systems sought after by African business schools. AACSB is the oldest among these accrediting systems and widely recognized globally as one of the most prestigious accreditations of business schools. Founded in 1916 by seventeen leading American colleges and universities, AACSB established its first standards for degree programs in business administration in 1919. AACSB started as an American organization and was formerly known as the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business, before officially changing its name to AACSB International—The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business in April 2001.

<sup>1</sup> For more details on the AABS accreditation standards, see document AABS Accreditation Standards and Criteria Guidelines available on the AABS website.

AMBA established its initial vision for business schools in 1967, under the Business Graduates Association (BGA). It established an accreditation process in 1983 with the mission of promoting postgraduate management education internationally, and supporting the Master of Business Administration (MBA) stature as the flagship program at this level. The BGA changed its name to AMBA in 1987. Initially, AMBA primarily focused on accrediting MBA programs offered by business schools in the United Kingdom. However, over time, the organization expanded its reach and began accrediting MBA programs from institutions around the world. AMBA also provides the option to seek MBM and DBA accreditation (after initial MBA portfolio accreditation). However, for this paper, we have focused on AMBA's core MBA accreditation system.

EFMD was founded in 1972 and launched its EQUIS accreditation in 1997. Initially, EQUIS focused on accrediting business schools in Europe and promoting excellence in European management education. Recognizing the global nature of business education and the increasing globalization of business schools, EQUIS expanded its scope and coverage over time to become a highly respected accreditation system recognized worldwide. EFMD also launched its EFMD program accreditation system, EPAS, in 2005 – which was renamed EFMD Accredited in 2020.

Table 1 provides a comparison between the AABS, AACSB, EQUIS, EFMD Accredited and AMBA accreditations. The table shows that, while in essence the five accrediting systems are focusing on promoting top quality and impactful BHE offerings and use somehow overlapping assessment standards and criteria, they remain distinctive in several aspects.

Interms of geographic scope, the AABS Accreditation is a regional accrediting system focusing on BHE institutions in Africa. It promotes collaboration among African institutions and addresses the unique challenges and needs of African business higher education. AACSB, EQUIS, EFMD Accredited, and AMBA are global accreditations covering BHE institutions worldwide; although, as explained earlier, each of them started in their home regions before expanding their coverage to include institutions from other regions around the world.

The five accreditations are also different in terms of the scope of accreditation. AABS, AACSB, and EQUIS are institutional accreditations which means that the accreditation covers all business and management degrees offered by the accredited institution. AMBA and EFMD Accredited focus on programme-level accreditation. AMBA, while including institutional factors within the assessment criteria, grants its accreditation primarily to the MBA program portfolio (i.e., all MBA programs offered by the institution). Its scope is therefore MBAprograms-focused rather than institutional and covers specifically the quality and delivery of MBA education. EFMD Accredited similarly considers the institutional factors as a context to the program (or program set) accreditation. However, unlike AMBA, EFMD Accredited is open to all types of business and management degree programs offered by the institution from bachelor's level to doctoral studies (i.e., not limited to MBA).

Moreover, the five accreditations use different sets of assessment standards and criteria showing both commonalities and important differences. Recognizing the diversity of contexts and regulatory systems in which BHE institutions operate the five accrediting systems include context, strategic planning, and governance as foundational standards in their review. The purpose of these standards is to situate the institution within its context and to show how its portfolio of programs and activities fits within and is driven by its vision, mission, and strategic agenda with a sufficient degree of coherence, autonomy, and sustainability.

The five accreditations also include standards and/or criteria related to faculty, students, staff, curricula design and delivery, research, financial and non-financial resources, and engagement with stakeholders to ensure that these important aspects are managed in a way that promotes excellence, sustainability, and continuous improvement in the quality and impact of the institution's portfolio of programs and activities. However, while the institutional accreditation systems (i.e., AABS, AACSB, and EQUIS) focus more strongly on the institutional factors, AMBA and EFMD Accredited focus more deeply on the specific program/ curricular aspects.

Table 1. Summary Comparison among AABS, AACSB, EQUIS, AMBA, and EFMD Accredited Accreditation Systems<sup>a</sup>

Number of accredited institutions/programs	List of standards	Number of standards	Cycles <sup>b</sup>	Typical Acceptaitation	Geographic scope	Scope of accreditation	Headquarters	Year launched	
7	Relevance to the African Context Mission, Visions, and Strategy Governance Resources Students Faculty External Relations Programs Research Impact on Africa Sustainability	11	Reaccreditation: 3 or 5 years	Initial: Up to 3 years	Regional (Africa)	Institution	Johannesburg (South Africa)	2018	AABS
1020 (around 1% from Africa)	· Strategic Planning · Physical, Virtual, and Financial Resources · Faculty and Professional Staff Resources · Curriculum · Assurance of Learning · Learner Progression · Teaching Effectiveness and Impact · Impact of Scholarship · Engagement and Societal Impact	9	Reaccreditation: Transitioning from 5 to 6 years (from 1/1/2026)	Initial: 3.5 – 6 years post-eligi- bility	Global	Institution	Tampa (Florida, United States)	1919	AACSB
221 (around 2% from Africa)	· Context, Governance and Strategy · Programmes · Students · Faculty · Research and Development · Executive Education · Resources and Administration · Internationalisation · Internationalisation · Ethics, Responsibility and Sustainability · Connections with Practice	10	Reaccreditation: 3 or 5 years	Initial: 2 years post eligibility	Global	Institution	Brussels (Belgium)	1997	EQUIS
303 (around 4% from Africa)	<ul> <li>The MBA Portfolio</li> <li>The Institution</li> <li>The Student Cohort</li> <li>Experience</li> <li>MBA Design, Curriculum and Assessment</li> <li>Impact</li> </ul>	ហ	Reaccreditation: 3 or 5 years	Initial: 1.5 – 2 years from 'Initial Stage'	Global	MBA Programme Portfolio (primarily)	London (United Kingdom)	1983	AMBA
113 (around 2% from Africa)	The Institutional Context Programme Design Programme Delivery & Operations Programme Outcomes Quality Assurance Processes	បា	Reaccredita- tion: 3 or 5 years	Initial: 2 – 4 years	Global	Programme	Brussels (Belgium)	2005	EFMD Accredited

a Source. Authors' own development based on information extracted from the accrediting bodies' websites visited on April 27, 2024

b In certain circumstances, the accrediting bodies have shorter cycles – to allow for deferrals, appeals etc. These have been ignored for the purpose of this comparison.

However, as explained earlier, the geographic focus is one of the main differences among the five accreditation systems and this is clearly reflected in their assessment standards and criteria. Given its focus on the African context, AABS Accreditation recognizes the unique needs and challenges of African business education. Whenever applicable, the focus of the standards' review and assessment is primarily put on the quality, but also on the relevance to the African context and the impact the institution is making on its local and regional communities. Additionally, two standards are exclusively dedicated to the "relevance to the African context" and "Impact on Africa". AACSB, EQUIS, AMBA, and EFMD Accredited have a broader and global geographic scope and use therefore global benchmarks when evaluating institutions.

Both AACSB and EQUIS accreditations place a stronger emphasis on research and scholarly activity, encouraging schools to contribute to business knowledge. They use rigorous criteria to assess the quality and impact of the research and intellectual contributions produced by the institution's members. For AACSB, research (along with practice engagement) is also used as a key input to generate faculty profiles distinguishing four main categories of faculty: scholarly academics, scholarly practitioners, practice academics, and instructional practitioners.

AACSB gives strong priority to positive societal impact, with one dedicated standard, namely, Standard 9: Engagement and Societal Impact, in addition to guidance embedded within multiple standards. Schools seeking accreditation/ re-accreditation are expected to contribute to mitigating some of society's most pressing economic, social, human, and environmental problems. AACSB also gives special importance to program-level continuous improvement efforts, dedicating a whole standard to the assurance of learning (AoL) to ensure that the institution is using rigorous and well-documented AoL processes.

EQUIS, on their side, places a special emphasis on internationalization, connections with practice, ethics, responsibility, and sustainability considering them as transversal dimensions. These dimensions are woven through all standards. Additionally, each one of them is included as a stand-alone standard to allow a focused overview of the institution's

strategy and achievements in these areas. Another difference between EQUIS and the other accrediting systems is the inclusion of a separate standard for executive education considering it as a specific, though optional, activity requiring a different administrative organization, different skills in faculty and staff, and different program design.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that there is significant variation in the financial costs attached to these top international accreditations. The headline accreditation costs are provided in Appendix 1. It is important to consider that the accreditation agency costs are just the "explicit" financial requirements. Additional financial resources, which could be referred to as "implicit" accreditation costs, are necessary to align to the accreditation standards and criteria and manage the accreditation-related processes and logistics (e.g. strategy alignment, internal human, systems, and infrastructure resourcing, preparation of reports, AoL, etc.).

## **Accredited Schools in Africa**

The list of African-accredited schools is presented in Appendix 2. To date, Gordon Institute of Business Science (University of Pretoria, South Africa) and Henley Business School Africa (South Africa) are the only African BHE institutions holding four of the five international accreditations covered in this paper (AABS, AACSB, EQUIS, and AMBA). Three schools are AACSB, EQUIS, and AMBA accredited; these are the American University in Cairo School of Business (Egypt), Stellenbosch Business School (South Africa), and University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business (South Africa). Lagos Business School (Nigeria) is AABS, AACSB, and AMBA accredited. Three institutions are double accredited. Wits Business School (University of the Witwatersrand) and North West University (NWU) Business School (both from South Africa) hold AABS and AMBA accreditations, while the Mediterranean School of Business (South Mediterranean University, Tunisia) holds both AMBA and EFMD Accredited accreditations. Twelve other institutions hold one of the five accreditations.

In total 21 African BHE intuitions hold at least one of the five accreditations. Considering the size and diversity of the African BHE landscape, this number remains modest, and the opportunities for progress are certainly significant.

### Conclusion

International accreditations play a crucial role in shaping the landscape of business education worldwide. They serve as external validations of a BHE institution's quality, reputation, and commitment to excellence and continuous improvement. In such a context, the AABS Accreditation has emerged as a vigorous accrediting system in the realm of business education in Africa. Through a comprehensive comparative analysis, this white paper has shed light on the distinctiveness and uniqueness of AABS Accreditation: its focus on Africa and the central importance it gives to the relevance of the institution's offerings to the African context and its impact on Africa. This unique focus ensures that BHE institutions accredited by AABS not only meet the quality requirements in terms of offering, operations, and governance but also create meaningful impact within their local and broader African communities.

AABS Accreditation sets itself apart by placing a greater emphasis on the institution's understanding and contributions to address the specific challenges and opportunities present in the various and certainly diverse regions of the African continent. This localized holistic approach fosters adaptability and relevance to the challenging and rapidly evolving business landscapes of these regions. It ensures that AABS-accredited institutions cultivate well-rounded graduates equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills, and ethical values to excel both in a global context and the dynamic and particular African business environment requiring specific socio-cultural awareness and ethical grounding to make a positive and lasting impact on society.

As business education continues to evolve in an increasingly interconnected and diverse world, the emergence of AABS Accreditation has provided a vital alternative that addresses the unique needs and aspirations of African BHE institutions. By embracing the AABS Accreditation standards, institutions can position themselves as catalysts of change, driving inclusive economic growth and social development in their respective regions. Moreover, the AABS Accreditation process itself stands out for its collaborative and supportive nature. It encourages a continuous improvement mindset, providing schools with valuable feedback and guidance to enhance their programs and ensure sustained quality, relevance, and impact.

Looking forward, the landscape of international accreditations for business schools is expected to evolve in response to emerging trends and demands. The influence of technology, the growing importance of sustainability and ethics, and the increasing emphasis on experiential learning are some of the factors that will certainly shape future accreditation standards and criteria. As BHE institutions adapt to these changing dynamics, they surely must navigate the delicate balance between meeting accreditation standards and fostering a culture of creativity and innovation to address the evolving needs of the business world.

# **Authors' Biographies**

### Nizar Becheikh

Nizar Becheikh is an Associate Professor of Strategy and Innovation Management and former Interim Dean at the School of Business of the American University in Cairo (Egypt). He served as Associate Dean for Graduate Studies and Research from 2013 to 2018. He also served as Director of the EMBA, MBA, and CEMS/MIM programs at AUC. Before joining AUC, he served as Director of the EMBA program jointly offered by Nile University (Egypt) and IESE Business School (Barcelona, Spain). Becheikh has served as a board member of the Association of African Business Schools (AABS) from 2017 to 2023 and is currently a member of the AABS Accreditation Committee.

### Joanne Powell

Joanne Powell is Head of Advisory Services at Quality Education Development (QED), a longestablished advisory company that supports business schools with continuous improvement, international business school accreditation and leadership development. Joanne has extensive experience in education, training and assessment. Prior to joining QED, she worked as an educator, a chartered accountant and as Head of Assessment for Chartered Accountants Ireland. Joanne is also certified as a DISC Trainer (DISC Personality Profiling) and a Leadership Facilitator. She has worked with business schools across six continents, supporting them with accreditation and continuous improvement processes, including those related to the set up and implementation of data management for accreditation purposes. She is currently a member of AACSB's Middle East and North Africa Advisory Council (MENAAC).

# **Appendix 1. Headline Accreditation Costs<sup>a</sup>**

Annual Membership Fee		AABS (Institutional)	AACSB (Institutional)	EQUIS (Institutional) € 8,024 (US\$ 8,645)	onal)
Membership Fee		039 0,000	033 3,700		(030,0,040)
	Eligibility Application	US\$ 1,000	US\$ 2,400		€ 12,300 (US\$ 13,253)
Initial	Post Eligibility	US\$ 1,000	US\$ 7,140 (annual)		€ 12,300 (US\$ 13,253)
Feeb	Report Submission & Peer Review Visit	US\$ 5,500 + Expenses	+ Expenses		€ 20,500 (US\$ 22,088) + Expenses
	Total <sup>c</sup>	US\$ 7,500 + Expenses	US\$ 27,540 + Expenses d		€ 45,100 (US\$ 48,594) + Expenses
	Annual Membership	US\$ 3,000	096' <u>\$</u> \$SN		€ 8,024 (US\$ 8,645)
Post Accreditation Fees <sup>d</sup>	Annual A ccreditation Fee	US\$ 2,500	US\$ 7,140		€ 4,100 (US\$ 4,418)
	Reaccreditation Fee (due with reaccreditation cycle)	US\$ 5,000 (total) + Expenses	Expenses only		€ 32,800 (US\$ 35,339) + Expenses

a When applicable, costs are presented in the "home" currency and converted into US\$, between brackets, for comparison purposes. Conversion is done using Xe Currency Converter (www.xe.com/currencyconverter) based on the exchange rates valid as of May 10, 2024

Source. Authors' own development based on information extracted from the accrediting bodies' websites.

b Accreditation Fees are for a standard accreditation / reaccreditation process (without additional site-visits, deferrals, etc.). For AMBA and EFMD Accredited, costs relate to a single programme or programme set. For AACSB, it refers to Business Accreditation only. All fees are based on information provided on the relevant accreditation websites as of 7 March 2024. These costs should be taken as a guide only and final costs should always be confirmed with the relevant accreditation body.

c This is the total cost for the initial accreditation only, to which annual membership fees shall be added to get the total overall cost. d Includes annual post eligibility fees for one year only. Real cost will depend on the number of years for which the annual post eligibility fees are due.

# **Appendix 2. African Accredited Schools**

Appendix 2. African Accredited 30	choois					
Single Accreditation (12 Institutions)	Double Accredited (3 Institutions)	Triple Accredited (4 Institutions)	Quadruple Accredited (2 Institutions)		Number of Accredited Institutions	
<ul> <li>HEM Business School (Morocco)</li> <li>ISM Business School (Senegal)</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Wits Business School,</li> <li>University of the</li> <li>Witwatersrand (SA)</li> <li>North West University</li> <li>(NWU) Business School (SA)</li> </ul>	· Lagos Business School (Nigeria)	<ul> <li>Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), University of Pretoria (SA)</li> <li>Henley Business School Africa (SA)</li> </ul>		7	AABS
College of International Transportation and Logistics, Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport (Egypt) College of Management and Technology, Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport (Egypt) ESCA Ecole de Management (Morocco) International University of Rabat Business School (Morocco) Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of Pretoria (SA)		<ul> <li>Lagos Business School (Nigeria)</li> <li>The American University in Cairo School of Business (Egypt)</li> <li>Stellenbosch Business School (SA)</li> <li>University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business (SA)</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), University of Pretoria (SA)</li> <li>Henley Business School (UK/SA)</li> </ul>	List of Accredited Institutions	11	AACSB
		<ul> <li>The American University in Cairo School of Business (Egypt)</li> <li>Stellenbosch Business School (SA)</li> <li>University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business (SA)</li> </ul>	· Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), University of Pretoria (SA) · Henley Business School (UK/SA)	ted Institutions	5	EQUIS
· ISCAE Business School, Groupe ISCAE (Morocco) · Milpark Business School (SA) · Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University Business School (SA) · Rhodes Business School, Rhodes University (SA)	<ul> <li>Wits Business School,</li> <li>University of the</li> <li>Witwatersrand (SA)</li> <li>North West University (NWU)</li> <li>Business School (SA)</li> <li>Mediterranean School of</li> <li>Business, South</li> <li>Mediterranean University</li> <li>(Tunisia)</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Lagos Business School (Nigeria)</li> <li>The American University in Cairo School of Business (Egypt)</li> <li>Stellenbosch Business School (SA)</li> <li>University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business (SA)</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), University of Pretoria (SA)</li> <li>Henley Business School (UK/ SA)</li> </ul>		13	AMBA
· Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane School of Business Administration (Morocco)	<ul> <li>Mediterranean School of Business, South Mediterranean Uni- versity (Tunisia)</li> </ul>				2	EFMD Accredited