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"Another Uphill Challenge"

An article published in "The Financial Times" on 16 October 2016. Franz Heukamp, the new dean of IESE Business School in Barcelona, talks about the challenges he faces in his new position.

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by Jonathan Moules

As a keen cyclist, Franz Heukamp gets a regular workout negotiating the steep climb to his office at Iese

Business School in the hills
overlooking Barcelona.

He faces another uphill challenge professionally, having taken over the dean's role at Iese in September after 15 years under the governance of Jordi Canals.

Prof Canals is credited with transforming what was a very regionally focused teaching institution, best known for being run by Opus Dei ... into one of the world's top international business schools.

Revenues tripled to €98m by 2015, the MBA intake grew by 40 per cent and the number of people taking executive education courses rose by a third under Prof Canals. Iese also opened a second campus in Barcelona, expanded its footprint in Madrid and opened campuses in New York and Munich.

“I’m definitely in a bad position here,” says the 43-year-old wryly. “Jordi leaves absolutely on the height of his level of activity, of the reputation that he has achieved and clearly with a sense that he has done great things for the school.”

About 80 per cent of Iese’s MBA students now come from outside Spain, one of the highest levels for any business school.

For the executive MBA the proportion of non-Spanish students is closer to nine in 10, a reflection in part of the fact that this course is now split between teaching in Madrid, São Paulo and New York.

Prof Heukamp fits the trend of internationalisation at Iese in that he is the first non-Spanish dean in the school’s 58-year history.

Growing up in Cologne, he claims to have had very little experience of

business schools, largely because there is not as much of a tradition of getting a business school education in Germany as there is in the US and other European countries.

Prof Heukamp's first degree, from Technische Universität München in Germany, was in engineering, followed by a degree in civil engineering from École des Ponts et Chaussées in France and an engineering PhD from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

It was not until the last year of his doctoral studies, when Prof Heukamp started working with some people from MIT's business school, that he began considering this as an opportunity to build a career in teaching and research.

“I did have an offer from one of the top consulting firms to work for them, but that wasn't really what I

was looking for at the time,” Prof Heukamp says, insisting that he was most interested in academic postings by then. While searching for jobs he came across a post at Iese. “I thought it could be interesting,” he recalls.

Having been an engineering student, Prof Heukamp admits he wondered whether he would fit into a business school culture. As he was weighing up his options, however, he was advised that this difference would be a strength. He says that he was also interested early on in what he calls “institution building” through taking on management roles in academia.

The fact that Iese was looking to create a campus in Germany was one of the things that interested Prof Heukamp about moving to Barcelona after completing his own formal training in the US.

Given that he has worked at Iese since 2002, including several years in

senior management roles, Prof Heukamp describes himself as the “continuity” candidate. His appointment as secretary general in 2009 was considered to have made his future deanship all but inevitable.

He also has an understanding of what it means to lead change, having been involved in implementing several of his predecessor’s plans.

For instance, during his four years running the MBA programmes, Prof Heukamp led the launch of the executive MBA in São Paulo as well as the New York section of the global executive MBA.

The impact of the digitisation of learning is one of the challenges Prof Heukamp has said he would like to address during his time as dean.

“We believe that the best learning methodology is personal interaction

and discussion in class but we have also witnessed the benefits of blended and new learning technologies,” he says.

“Combining both worlds, we will continue developing cutting-edge methodologies that allow us to offer the best solution for each educational need.”

Lifelong learning is another of his concerns. This includes encouraging a greater pool of people to study part time for Iese’s global executive MBA, which turns 15 this year. He sees digitisation of teaching as part of this process.

“We wanted this to be a very international programme,” he says. “For that to be possible, it had to be at least partly online.”

Although Prof Heukamp is only 13 years younger than his predecessor, he claims that there is a sense he is

part of a new generation that can embrace new methods of teaching.

If he has the energy to tackle the steep climbs from Barcelona's city centre on his bike, perhaps Prof Heukamp has the stamina needed to lead Iese as it deals with the inevitable challenges of remaining at the forefront of business education.

"Europe's business schools must refocus on the common good" (Article by Franz Heukamp)

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