

Interview

Learning and Leading Globally: An Interview with the 2024 AIB Educator of the Year Frank Bournois

Frank Bournois¹, Shameen Prashantham¹

¹ China Europe International Business School, China

Keywords: international business education, geographic challenges, sustainability, artificial intelligence

<https://doi.org/10.46697/001c.122849>

AIB Insights

Vol. 24, Issue 5, 2024

Frank Bournois, Dean, China Europe International Business School and former Dean, ESCP was the recipient of the 2024 AIB Educator of the Year Award. This article provides excerpts of an interview with Dean Bournois conducted by a colleague at CEIBS and long-standing AIB member. At least three important lessons for international business scholars are offered. First, it is vital to balance and synergize knowledge creation and dissemination. Second, fostering cross-culturally intelligent talent for international organizations needs to be a priority for business schools and academics. Third, in the current geopolitically fraught times we face, it is vitally important for international business schools and scholars to facilitate the building of bridges between East and West by mobilizing multiple stakeholders representing business and non-market organizations actors. A key overarching theme, as explicitly noted in the conclusion, is the inextricable link between learning and leading which needs to be intentionally nurtured.

Interviewer: Shameen Prashantham [SP], CEIBS, China

Interviewee: Frank Bournois [FB], Dean, CEIBS, China

INTRODUCTION

Frank Bournois, Dean of the China Europe International Business School was selected as the 2024 AIB International Educator of the Year by the Fellows of the Academy of International Business (AIB).¹ He has had a fascinating career with prior stints as Dean at the University of Paris-Panthéon-Assas and ESCP in Paris. In the interview excerpts below, Dean Bournois reflects on his academic journey with his CEIBS colleague and AIB member, Shameen Prashantham. After a brief overview of his journey as a Dean, the interview then delves into the challenges and opportunities associated with being (1) an educator and (2) an administrator in a globally challenging environment – including in relation to building an innovative multi-campus undergraduate programme at ESCP which has become an exemplar of a truly global educational offering. Dean Bournois also provides advice to both scholars and administrators regarding major macroenvironmental trends such as geopolitics, sustainability and AI.

JOURNEY AS A DEAN

[SP]: Congratulations on being awarded the 2024 Educator of the Year Award by the AIB Fellows. It is an honour that reflects your work as a leader and educator at different institutions, notably ESCP in France and China Europe International Business School (CEIBS) in Shanghai. Let's start with how you became a dean.

[FB]: It is indeed an honour to get this award from the AIB, a very prestigious academic association.

Before becoming the Dean at ESCP, I had already been a dean at the University of Paris-Panthéon-Assas. It was not something I calculated or planned for, but I was an academic in international management studies, specialising in governance and I think that even if you do not always realise this, people outside see you as an obvious leader.

Then the Chamber of Commerce of Paris came to see me and this is how in 2014 I got into ESCP, the oldest business school in the world with campuses in many European countries. I had the pleasure to serve there for nine years. It was a great adventure to set up ESCP's first campus outside Europe in Dubai, in the Middle East. I also opened the Warsaw campus in central and eastern Europe.

And then, as I was entering my early 60s, came the big challenge to consider CEIBS, another international institution with a leading position. I had previously visited CEIBS for accreditation. It was like falling in love with a business school that has "China", "Europe" and "international" in

¹ The Award Selection Committee consisted of Carl Fey (Chair), J.T. Li, Anu Phene, Saeed Samiee, and Grazia Santangelo.

its name and is well-known to companies and students. For me, it was an obvious choice to make, in March 2023.

PERSPECTIVES AS AN EDUCATOR

[SP]: A fascinating journey! You mentioned your interest in leadership and governance. How have you brought that expertise into the classroom?

[FB]: I was lucky to have started out as a deputy director in human resources in one of the biggest divisions of Rhone-Poulenc, a European leading chemical company. This is where I wrote my PhD dissertation on how European leaders make it to the top. I developed a model showing some qualities that companies would really consider as important. This is how I got into “high potentials”. I was struck from the beginning by the need to look for people with intellectual qualities, people not only who were well-trained but who also demonstrated analytical and strategic skills. With time, I saw these qualities being applied to digital transformation and, nowadays, also ESG and sustainable development.

I designed leadership development programs in different business sectors, for example Société Générale in banking, L’Oreal in the cosmetics industry, Airbus in aviation, and even for the civil service. At CEIBS, through a partnership with the Bologna Business School, we are helping Ferrari’s leaders of tomorrow to understand the big trends and changes in China. I truly believe that academic life offers something very unique, which is connecting with international organisations and their leaders, and we also train the leaders of tomorrow.

[SP]: What advice would you give to international business scholars in terms of integrating research and teaching, particularly to executive audiences?

[FB]: First, I think you need to be passionate about some segments of the organization. As for me, it started with leadership and HR systems, and then more and more I got into the general management area over time. My second piece of advice would be to also bring company people to your class because you will also learn in terms of pedagogy, and you will also learn in terms of your students’ reactions. Third, please throw yourself into writing case studies, because that’s another way to reinforce the link between companies and business schools. My experience is that when companies realize that a scholar has understood what they are doing and was able to articulate this in a case study, they open their doors for more research. My last piece of advice is to diversify your network of companies. No doubt, it takes a lot of time and effort to get to know a lot of people and make more contacts. But it is worthwhile and will feed the passion we are talking about.

PERSPECTIVES AS AN ADMINISTRATOR

[SP]: Let’s turn from pedagogy to you as an academic leader. What can other academic leaders learn from your experience in developing a unique bachelor’s degree program at ESCP, where students spend each year

in a different country? That’s about as international as it gets!

[FB]: In fact, we previously didn’t have any bachelor undergraduate program. I designed a system at ESCP, with its different campuses, whereby students could accelerate their understanding of international companies and become extremely sensitive to international variables. Over the three years of the Bachelor’s program, students would choose one of the campuses – London, Paris, Madrid, Turin or Warsaw – to start in. Then, depending on how well they did, they would have the possibility to move to another campus of their choice and move around different countries. And by the end, they would be attractive profiles for European employers to recruit in Europe and elsewhere, as well as for international companies operating in Europe.

But this meant that as a leader, I had to manage a fully-fledged multi-campus business school. In addition to having to manage the students, faculty and staff, there are different accreditors and regulators. As an illustration, in Spain you’ve got the regional community of Madrid as a regulator, but in the UK it is the national government with its Office for Students (OfS). And you haven’t got the same working hours or labour laws everywhere. This means one must orchestrate different actors like faculty as if they are musicians playing their different instruments, ensuring they are producing to a high quality for the audience – in other words, students and companies.

I learned that four things matter if you are a dean or administrator at a global business school. First, you need to be very aware of the environment and its governance and have good relationships with the various ministries. Second, you need to define and clarify the strategy of the school. Third, you have to organize in a way that is compatible with your different structures and campuses. For example, where is the authority to decide on a given matter? Will it be becoming top down from HQ? Finally, you have to adapt recognition and people management systems, because in some countries you can offer profit-sharing to employees but in other countries the same school can only be a nonprofit organization. So you need to send different messages that motivate the people there and keep the students happy.

LEADING IN GEOPOLITICALLY CHALLENGING TIMES

[SP]: Now you are based in China, at CEIBS, which leads me to the issue of geopolitical challenges. Indeed, you arrived shortly after China ended its zero-covid policy which had greatly curtailed people-to-people contact in China with the rest of the world, and this didn’t help. Geopolitics is increasingly important to scholars and practitioners of international business, and especially anyone trying to engage with China. What are your thoughts on coping with these challenging times?

[FB]: These are extremely challenging times. Strangely enough, just before Covid, there was already a growing field in Europe called business diplomacy. I remember that in 2016 we had launched a Master of Science in Business Diplomacy at ESCP working with a faculty member who

happened to also be an ambassador. Multinational organisations need to look carefully at how they are managing their portfolio of activities, sometimes in over 100 countries. Business diplomacy requires good strategic analysis of the national context and national differences.

Some national governments are themselves looking at this with a lot of interest. Some European governments have renamed their “Ministry of Finance” as the “Ministry of Finance, Economics, Industrial and Digital Sovereignty”. These countries still embrace globalisation, but in a more rational way. And it also shows that some people in the public sphere have opened more to the corporate world.

Specifically in relation to China, I think there is a lot for international managers to learn about the Chinese context. There are many prejudices and biases outside of China about the reality of China. Many managers probably underestimate the size of the market and the amount of cooperation there can be. Good company visits and country visits to China by von der Leyen from the European Union, Chancellor Schulz from Germany, President Macron from France, are always ending with good contracts and agreements being made. That is extremely important for the leading companies. Now, in some cases, it also involves some tensions on specific matters, like tariffs on electric vehicles from China into the EU, and on cognac from the EU into China.

But I believe that when these problems are carefully looked at by industry specialists and government officials, solutions will be found. Definitely, geopolitical aspects are getting more and more into the curricula of programs. This also calls for different profiles of faculty and opens up research space in international business that was usually kept in the hands of political science scholars. And this brings management more and more to the crossroads of these challenges of tomorrow.

[SP]: Speaking of diplomacy, in your relatively short period at CEIBS, you’ve hosted the deputy prime minister of Ireland on campus. On another occasion, you invited 16 consul generals of various European nations when a former Italian prime minister visited CEIBS. What would you suggest that other global academic leaders keep in mind, in these times?

[FB]: As I was saying earlier, company connections are key. But you also have to see this in the wider context of decision making in these geopolitically challenging times. In bringing to campus consuls-general, ambassadors, but also great people in their teams that are sometimes forgotten, like economic advisors who know so much about the country, this shows that there is a continuum between business schools, employers *and* governments. These people are there to foster the activities and trade between the companies of that country into the country where they are.

Specifically in the context of CEIBS, it is also a way to educate key audiences about the European Union. I wish to do more at CEIBS to help Chinese students and international students from outside of the EU to understand more of the complexities of the EU – not that the EU is extremely complex, but that the EU needs to be deciphered and understood. That will be a benefit for students, for employers and

for trade because I’m a strong believer of globalisation, despite the current geopolitical tensions.

MAKING SENSE OF SUSTAINABILITY AND AI

[SP]: That is encouraging, not least because there are global issues we face that need global solutions like climate change and AI regulation. What should academic leaders be thinking about and doing more of in relation to sustainability and AI from a global perspective?

[FB]: I think that these two – sustainability and AI – must be integrated into the curricula of business schools.

For sustainable development and ESG it is very important that companies and people we train reach carbon neutrality by 2050. Europe has been showing the way and is paying a price for this, with its 1.8 trillion euros of investment to do this with Scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions. In a business school like CEIBS, I think we are managing very well not only teaching ESG in the programs – going beyond 15% on average of ESG-relevant content in every course and producing great research on this topic – but also in walking the talk in the way the school manages its carbon footprint, how it is putting in place processes to reduce wastage in the school, etc. CEIBS is also considering the monitoring of this carbon footprint reduction with AI.

As for AI, I think is probably more important than even companies realize. Because technology moves very fast, we need to help our future leaders to use AI in a way that is going to serve the purpose of their organization, help make better decisions and give them more time to study how to implement those decisions. AI is going to be an accelerator. And this is precisely why they need to implement this quickly. At CEIBS faculty are thinking ahead about how to make students ready to use AI in their organization. We recently organized a great forum on this subject with a lot of alumni attending. This was confirmation for me that the transformation of a business school has to be done in partnership with the alumni community.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

[SP]: Any concluding thoughts as we wrap up this interview?

[FB]: I was always struck by something in history, which is an important idea that President Kennedy was going to express in a speech on the 22nd of November, 1963. Unfortunately, he died that day and could not make that speech. But what he intended to say was that it is important to understand that learning and leadership are indispensable to one another. I think this is so true for politicians like him because when you are in a leadership position, you have the duty to lead people, and you are also learning a lot from the various contexts you encounter. And I think this is also something that every faculty in business schools should be cognizant of. We are not merely teaching and equipping people in a technical sense. Rather, we should be thinking of what we do to help leaders at all levels to become aware of the responsibilities that they have in life and towards society more generally.

[SP]: Frank, thank you very much for sharing your time and wisdom. And once again, congratulations on being honoured with the AIB educator of the Year Award.

[FB]: Thank you so much, Shameen.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Frank Bournois joined CEIBS as Vice President and Dean in April 2023. Prior to this, he served as President of ESCP Business School from 2014 to 2023. As a senior consultant in human resources and leadership and a distinguished scholar of management education, Prof. Bournois has demonstrated both immense passion for management education and exceptional ability to manage top business schools throughout his career, making a profound impact on the European management community. Notably, he has received the highest honours from the French Government,

including Officer in the Legion of Honour and Commander in the Order of Merit (France).

Shameen Prashantham is Professor of International Business and Strategy at China Europe International Business School. His research interests relate to corporation–startup partnering (which he refers to as “dancing with gorillas”), new venture internationalization, strategy-as-practice and collaboration for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). His research has been published in the *Harvard Business Review*, *Journal of International Business Studies* and *Journal of Management Studies*, among other outlets. He is the author of a widely acclaimed book on partnering between large multinationals and smaller entrepreneurial ventures titled *Gorillas can Dance: Lessons from Microsoft and Other Corporations on Partnering with Startups* (Wiley, 2022).



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.