



Hot News

*Meet Philip Vergauwen, new
Dean of the Solvay Brussels
School of Economics and
Management.*

Interview with Philip Vergauwen: What makes a business school successful

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How did you become the Dean of the Solvay Brussels School?

Since 2013, I have had the enormous pleasure of being the Dean of the Maastricht University School of Business & Economics, a relatively young and vibrant business school. In recent years we introduced a number of strategic changes which have been in full implementation phase since last summer. Early in 2017, I received an unexpected invitation from Dominique Leroy, Chair of the International Advisory Board at SBS-EM. She told me that they were looking for a successor who would bring a fresh and external vision to the institution. This came as a total surprise: as a Flemish boy who had studied in Leuven, the School had always fascinated me, but it remained a faraway dream. Although the opportunity has come perhaps a little too soon, I feel ready for this new move. My contribution at Maastricht was coming to an end anyway. At a personal level, too. My three daughters had just left the family home to enroll in universities in Ghent, Maastricht and Leuven, thus paving the way for a new phase in my life.



Could you tell us more about your experience at the Maastricht University School of Business & Economics?

That was a long road together! I started teaching at Maastricht back in 1997, right before the end of my PhD in Leuven. At that time, the University was just over twelve years old and, as a young professor, I felt immediately spurred on by the strong entrepreneurial spirit. Over the years, I assumed various posts in the institute, and I also had my first external Deanship experience at Hasselt University from 2007 to 2010, a period I still look back on with a lot of warmth and excitement!

In my recent position as Dean at Maastricht, my main objective was to reinforce and boost inter- and intra-faculty collaboration. Both research and academic departments had traditionally been working in a highly fragmented way, thereby undermining the full potential of the school. Since 2013, we introduced strategic management changes that have already resulted in a change of mind-set. Of course, this is a long-term process that requires continuous adjustments, but I am proud of what we have already achieved. Besides, the performance of this school has also been widely acknowledged at an international level, as shown by its Triple Crown accreditation awarded by the AACSB, AMBA and EQUIS. This is a fantastic achievement for a business school that started up a mere thirty years ago.



What makes a business school successful?

One major criterion for a business school to be successful is how closely its three key dimensions are integrated: innovation in education, in research, and in executive education. These core business activities are inter-related, and all staff and faculty members should be working closely

together in order to develop the school's full potential. Look at the education level, for example. Here, it is essential never to stop innovating so that we can prepare tomorrow's leaders to face future challenges. About 65% of the jobs which our current students will be holding down do not yet exist today. If we want to train them to become top managers in their field, we need to anticipate changes in the market and continuously to revise our curricula to include subjects such as AI (Artificial Intelligence), big data, biotechnology and the Internet of Things. This obviously requires close collaboration with the research departments of the University, which should make its knowledge as openly available and widely applicable as possible.

In the same vein, executive education provides the opportunity to strengthen the bonds between students, academics and the market. It is in the interests of industry to improve the quality of research and education and make it as relevant as possible to their current and future challenges. For them it is essential that the next generation will be able to address issues such as resource scarcity, air quality, new mobility, and an ageing population, as well as to construct a workplace that fulfils their needs and aspirations.

In the end, it is all about people management: people from different disciplines need to understand and talk to each other and see the value of each other's work.

People are what matters most. It is not because something works on paper that it will work in practice. We all come with our own backgrounds and, increasingly, with different cultural, legal and sociological backgrounds that influence the way we perceive and implement a solution.

What are your objectives, strategy and vision as Dean of the SBS-EM for the next few years?

Historically, the SBS-EM has always been regarded as a top academic and research institution with a sound understanding of, and relevance to, industry and society as a whole. As Dean of the School and together with my team, we will focus on safeguarding and enhancing this reputation, which is currently undermined at an international level. The outside world expects us to be at the forefront of innovation and we should live up to that. A few years ago, the development of our first Master's degree in Business Engineering, integrating business and science, was recognized by the Financial Times as the best Master degree in Management in Belgium. It also positioned the School as a college of choice for top students from around the world. We need to continue along this path and make sure that our educational, research and executive Programmes pro-actively match up to the needs of society. There is no point in focusing on university rankings: these will follow in due course as we establish the quality of our reputation at an international level.

Certainly, I shall not automatically apply the exact same strategy as the one I implemented in Maastricht. It will all have to be developed and implemented in consultation with the people who make up the institution. "People management" matters, even at family level. In fact, I am always astonished to realize how different my three daughters are from each other, even though they grew up in exactly the same environment, sharing the same socio-economic background and receiving the same education.

What are your passions outside the School?

Outside my work, I love to read everything that is not related to economics and business! Two of my favorite books are "*Love in the Time of Cholera*" by the Colombian, writer Gabriel García Márquez, and "*Decline and Fall*" by the British author Evelyn Waugh.

I also spend a lot of time walking: not just walking to work every morning but also when I am travelling. I avoid taking taxis as much as possible, even if I am unfamiliar with the city.

Last but not least, the four women in my family home take up a significant and most valuable part of my time and thoughts!

