
Claire Pike remembers



By Shellie Karabell

In 1968, Claire Pike began her MBA studies at INSEAD, her first step on the road leading to her present position as Secretary General of the school. After three decades of service, she talks to INSEAD Knowledge Executive Editor Shellie Karabell about her experiences and about developments at the school.

The year is 1968: student riots in Paris; assassinations in the US, the Soviets invade Czechoslovakia, the global women's movement begins in earnest -- and Claire Pike begins her MBA studies at INSEAD, her first step on the road leading to her present position as Secretary General of the school.

INSEAD itself is just ten years old. There is only one campus; the classrooms have finally been moved from the Chateau to the new buildings nestled in the forests of Fontainebleau. Philippe Dennis is Director General and Roger Godino is part-time Dean of Faculty; there are 10 faculty members (compared with 140 today), 192 'participants' as the students were called then, among them four (yes: four) women.



“INSEAD didn’t really know what to do with us,” she recalls. “So they put us one per section: total exposure, and a great way for many of the participants to be ever so aggressive. “ A common question (from male participants to

her) was: “What are you doing here?” I was very young and shocked by this hostility.”

It didn’t take her long though to find her feet: “Finally I said, ‘like you – to make more money!’”

That no-nonsense resolve, coupled with lady-like charm, have since those times evolved into the Claire Pike persona. “Claude Janssen (INSEAD founder and Honorary Chairman of the Board) often tells me: ‘Claire, I don’t know whether I’m dealing with the Secretary or the General!’”

She did move ahead after finishing her studies at INSEAD, in the marketing department of L’Oreal. “The market at that time was completely open,” she recalls. “And the reason was that many European companies were becoming international, and therefore coming to INSEAD to recruit. It was relatively easy to find a job and I was immediately privileged to be recruited by L’Oreal, which at that time had tremendous confidence in young people ... so it was a tremendous confidence booster.”

At L’Oreal, Claire Pike also acquired marketing skills which she continued to hone in her various jobs at INSEAD over the ensuing three decades. INSEAD was the first place she turned to, after having left the corporate world to start a family. “I wanted to continue working,” she recalls, “but in a different way. I also discovered I would not jump out of my bed just to make more money; I needed a larger dream.”

That dream embodies itself at INSEAD, first as head of admissions for the MBA. “It was a booming market with ghastly application forms: there was still a question about military service, and ‘she’ did not exist – and this was 10 years after I’d graduated! So I had a real challenge and that’s when the marketing skills from L’Oreal came in handy. We didn’t have the budget but at least I had the mechanism to look at how to expand the programme and start developing the brand.”

From that point, Claire Pike moved to Career Services, became MBA Director and then External relations Director before becoming Secretary General, serving as the Dean’s right arm, handling board communications and overseeing various committees. “I’m the ultimate paper-pusher,” she says modestly.

Looking back on her three decades-plus at INSEAD, she is delighted by the increase in women students, accounting for a third of the intake this year. That's still lagging behind some other major business schools such as Harvard, but she feels "real progress" has been made. "People should realise that students are coming from 80 different countries, and many of them still do not allow women to study or to practise business ... It's excellent to have so many young women coming from India and China because that is a great sign that whatever conservatism or 'slowness' we have in some countries, things are changing. I'm also proud to say that 20 per cent of the board is female."

"But," she continues, "what I do regret - and that's an important part of the story - is the progress (in terms of increasing the number of women) in Executive Education and on the faculty is too slow. For me, still being around 20 per cent is not good enough."

She is also pleased by INSEAD's international focus. "I'm a confirmed European," she says. "I joined INSEAD as a student because of this big commitment to building Europe. " And there's the renewed emphasis on creating more original research, "producing more of your own ideas," rather than rely on case studies from other institutions.

"All of these things happened because of the values that were set right at the beginning of the school," she says. "Being international, being diversified, and my hope for the future is that these values continue to strengthen."

"There's no need to become complacent," she cautions, "or to become too Americanised and go for all sorts of programmes or products because we're in the market and we have to deliver. The aim is to keep a distinct position, keep those founding values strong, and to 'give back.' We need to keep in mind this notion of 'generosity.' As far as women are concerned, we need to continue bringing them along, making space for them in the marketplace, making sure they can develop properly. It's the responsibility of the people who have benefited from INSEAD. I would like to see that happen."

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About the author(s)

Shellie Karabell is Director and Executive Editor of INSEAD Knowledge. [View full profile](#)