

MEET USB'S NEW DIRECTOR

Man of many talents

I T APPEARS THAT USB director-to-be Prof John Powell is one of those people who has more hours in his day than most.

Not only is he professor of Strategy and head of Marketing and Strategy at the UK's Cardiff University, he also paints in watercolour, plays the flute and, for the past three years, has been – by his own effort – rebuilding a house near the Welsh capital.

Powell and his partner Juani Swart, a South African originating from Krugersdorp on the West Rand, enjoy going to the ballet. Powell is learning Afrikaans too. In fact, he complains that Swart's English is so good that he doesn't get to practise his Afrikaans on her, and one of the reasons he is excited to have been chosen to take the helm from Professor Eon Smit is that he will have more people with whom to practise his Afrikaans.

He also speaks seven other languages; three fluently.

Powell is excited to start his new job on 1 May.

"I've thought of applying for deanships in many places over the past few years, but I have never found a place that I want to make a difference to more than the USB," says the naval engineer turned businessman turned academic.

After leaving the UK's prestigious Cambridge University with an MA in electrical engineering, Powell joined British defence, security and aerospace company BAE's military aircraft division in 1979 as a systems engineer. Sixteen years later he was the UK representative on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Foresight Committee and the UK 'focal point' for NATO's cooperative study into military technology forecasting to 2010. And that's not all.

Powell's step into academia was through

Professor John Powell from Cardiff is no stranger to South Africa. **SUE BLAINE** speaks to University of Stellenbosch Business School director-to-be about his varied interests.

the back door: In 1995, while Director of Submarines at BAE, Powell received a year-long fellowship to study major project dynamics at the UK's Cranfield University in the English Midlands. The study leave was supposed to fill a hiatus caused by BAE's attempts to buy a dockyard from where it could sell its submarines, but ultimately it led to a PhD for Powell and a career change.

"I found it immensely satisfying (to study at an academic institution). When you are doing a job, there is no time to think about what you are doing," he says.

Since Powell became senior research fellow at Cranfield University's School of Defence Management in December 1995, he has lectured strategic management and analysis both at Cranfield and at the Universities of Bath, Southampton and Cardiff.

Taking up the professorship of Strategy at Cardiff in December 2007 brought Powell home. He is also head of the Marketing and Strategy Department.

"I'm a Welshman ... I was brought up on the South Wales docks. Cardiff's a lot like Cape Town, but there's a lot more rain and cloud," he says. The Welsh capital is that country's largest city, it is a cultural and political hub, and is also a port – and this is the link he feels it has with Cape Town.

"There was lots of maritime trade in both cities. Cardiff was and is very multicultural. When I was growing up, only about thirty per cent of the faces I saw were white ... I love that multiculturalism in Cape Town, too," he says.

Powell has been coming to South Africa on holiday for several years as Swart's parents retired to Swellendam, which he describes as "a lively place, once you get to know it". He has also visited Wilderness, Knysna and Johannesburg.

Four years ago Powell and Swart (a knowledge management specialist) began presenting a short MBA elective at the USB, called Managing Knowledge for Strategic Effectiveness. He is also a USB PhD exam-

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Prof John Powell takes office as director of the USB on 1 May 2010

PICTURE: MELANIE CLEARY

iner and says his experience at the business school has shown him that it believes, as he does, that it is “important to be pursuing something which is worthwhile and which is seen to be worthwhile by those engaged in it”.

The USB also encompasses two other “managerial themes” that he believes make organisations internationally effective and self-confident – the combination of a clear, agreed vision and realistic policy with “clear-edged delegation of authority” under that policy, and the awareness that an organisation’s cross-boundary effectiveness is “a matter of synergy of interest between the parties crossing that boundary”.

The way in which USB is run gives Powell a “good feeling”.

“It’s a really good place to work: there is a common sense that prevails,” he says, decrying the negative impact on UK academia of the UK government’s performance measurements for academics. Powell argues that this evaluation system has created a “claustrophobic atmosphere” where academics become

overly driven by performance measurement rules.

“The aspirations in South Africa are different. In South Africa it’s ‘Let’s teach really well; let’s think really well,’” he says.

South African universities are also subsidised roughly according to how much research they have published each year, and Powell is not against this. “Of course, people who fund research – whether they are the state, large funding bodies or industrial organisations – need evidence that their money and their goodwill is being put to good use, but the trick is not to forget that it is actually the research that needs to be put to good use,” he says.

The MBA is often seen as a business school’s flagship programme, and Powell agrees that any business school needs to offer a first class MBA, but he observes that not all business schools see their MBA programme as their most important offering and that there should be flexibility in this area. What an MBA must do is remain relevant to the time and the place, he says.

ON HIS BEDSIDE TABLE?

‘*The Boer War*
by Thomas Pakenham,
Venice Sketchbook
by Fabrice Moireau.’

AND HIS FAVOURITE PIECE OF MUSIC?

‘Easy. **1st movement Bach Double Violin Concerto.** I heard it once in a small church right up in the Tarentaise valley in Savoie.’

“It’s not just an academic qualification. It must remain relevant to industry. I see a variety of philosophies in MBAs around the world ... they reflect the national desires, the national feeling. The values are very different in different societies,” he says.

“There is clearly a great deal of entrepreneurship in South Africa: even street traders know about how and where to take a risk. But big and international business is always going to be important to South Africa. Big business has money and it is the business schools’ link to the world. South African business schools must have one face to South Africa and the other to the world,” he says.

When Powell reaches USB, the second clause of the early Hippocratic Oath – *First, do no harm* – will be topmost in his mind.

“USB has terrific teaching, good resources, and industrial and academic connections across the world. My aim is not to change any of that, but to strengthen the linkages between them. They need to be mobilised better to improve the relevance and impact of what USB is doing,” he says. **a**