

European college grooms EU elite

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At a time when studying in a country other than one's own is getting increasingly popular in the EU, a post-graduate university with campuses in two member states claims to be "the most genuinely 'European'" university institute of European studies.

Seen as churning out most of the EU's elite, the College of Europe situated in Bruges, Belgium and Natolin (Warsaw), Poland, gathers more than 400 students from both the EU and beyond.



The College of Europe's campus in Natolin opened in 1994 - it is part of a 120 hectare historical park and nature reserve (Photo: EUobserver.com)

In the 2007 to 2008 academic year 412 students from 54 nationalities were present on the two campuses of the College, but since it opened its doors in 1949, the institution has handled almost 10,000 students altogether.

It offers post-graduate programmes in a number of EU-related disciplines on its Bruges campus – economy, law, political and administrative studies, international relations and diplomacy, as well as a more general European Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies programme in Natolin.

In order to study in the College of Europe, candidates have to demonstrate good levels of French and English, a good academic background, as well as present recommendation letters from professors to back up their capacities.

The idea of creating the College dates back to the post-war context of 1948, when Salvador de Madariaga, a Spanish statesman, thinker and writer in exile, suggested establishing an institution where young graduates from different countries could study, but also live together for 10 months.

After setting up the Bruges campus then, the opening of the second one in Natolin (Warsaw) followed in 1994.

The College is funded by tuition and fees, as well as by public contributors – the main being the European Union, and the Belgian and Polish authorities – and some private funding.

The fee for studying in the school has been fixed at €17.640 for the 2008 to 2009 academic year, covering both tuition, and board and lodging in the student residencies.

Several national governments, private organisations and foundations, as well European institutions, offer scholarships which fully or partly cover that cost.

An elite school?

Most of the school's graduates - often speaking four or five languages - now work in the sector of services (27 percent), or in the EU institutions (24 percent).

Many also work in national administrations, diplomatic services, NGOs and foundations, or the academic sphere.

Some have reached particularly high positions – such as Finnish foreign minister Alexander Stubb; Austrian foreign minister Ursula Plassnik; Manuel Marin, a former president of the European Commission; Ledi Bianku, a judge at the European Court for Human Rights, as well as a number of MEPs.

Angela O'Neill, director of communications in the College, recognises that "yes, we have a lot of people who have been in the College who have become influential on the European stage."

But according to her, this is not what the institution is all about and is rather a natural consequence of several factors, including the bilingual teaching and the specific atmosphere in the school.

"The bilingualism is important, the fact that we're not just sticking to one language as many other programmes are; the fact that many people come here to study but also to experience Europe; the fact that they're living together, all these different nationalities, make it different for example from an Erasmus programme," she argues.

"At the College it becomes an even more intense and rich sort of exchange, an understanding of all these different nationalities and how they react and...being able to predict cultural differences and how people would react in different situations," makes the experience so educational, she says.

Additionally, the specific College atmosphere eventually creates certain bonds between the students who often remain in touch and naturally, a solid network of alumni has been progressively created.

A 'College spirit'

Not surprisingly therefore, for many the principal advantage of the school is this particular "College spirit" and the international atmosphere it provides.

Anton from Russia just graduated from the College, after spending three years studying in Strasbourg, France.

"In France I was a foreign student, a foreigner among French people. Here, the College provides a multicultural environment, a relationship between equals," he says.

Adina from Romania who has been living in France for 10 years also stresses the "multicultural environment."

"Here everybody has different experiences, comes from a different country, lived in different countries, speaks several languages. After a year in the College, all this seems almost normal to me somehow – but it's not like this in the 'outside world'."

As many of her colleagues, she would like to go to Brussels and possibly to work for the European Commission in the future.

Nobody excludes going back to their home countries however – but "maybe later."

"I cannot go back now to Poland and be only with Polish people, it's not me," says Karolina from Poland, who would like to work in the Luxembourg-based Court of Justice in the long term.

Besides being enriching on a personal level, living and working in an international environment allows comparing practices in the different countries and is very interesting at a professional level, she argues.

One year after college

Many of the alumni who graduated from the College a year ago, have had the same desire and a considerable amount of them is now in Brussels.

Brussels is a city where you can find people with similar interests and "you don't feel a foreigner," says Mireya from Spain, who currently works as a journalist for a Spanish news site.

"It's like an Erasmus city with people who work," she jokes.

Other fresh "anciens" in Brussels work in consultancies and lobbying firms, as MEPs' assistants - or as contractual agents in the European Commission.

Only a minority of them hold jobs however - most are reluctantly accepting internships hoping to progressively push their way through to a real job contract.

"Having done the College might be helpful for a certain entry level position in the Brussels surrounding, but for most jobs experience is crucial, and further specialisation and/or PhD, and/or experience in the field is necessary," says Martin, who currently works as head of the trade department in a public administration and communications agency in Brussels.

Aspiring to work in "the field of international political relations" and development economics in the long term, he says for employers in this kind of sectors, "experience remains an essential factor."

Life outside of Brussels

A number of the school's graduates also choose a less "traditional" path – and preferred not to go to the "College Mecca" as some of them jokingly call Brussels.

Even in these cases, the College background can help, they argue.

Judith graduated from the College last year and after an internship at the OSCE office in Vienna, she is currently completing one in the OSCE Mission in Serbia - before leaving for Armenia in September to teach European law at the Law Faculty of the State University of Yerevan.

She received help in preparing for her first OSCE interview from an alumni who had been through the same experience as her, and "since then I have also met several College alumni, at my work in Vienna, as well as in Serbia."

"Even here [in Serbia] in my project it helped me to a certain extent to have some 'College connections,' in order to get in touch with the right people for my project for instance. Actually three of the interviews I had so far were with or helped by College alumni," she says.

Jasmina from Macedonia, about to start working for her country's ministry for foreign affairs after an internship in the European Parliament, also thinks her diploma was "one of the decisive factors to get the job."

For her part, Anita from Poland, who spent six months in Ukraine doing voluntary work for an NGO, believes that the experience in the College of Europe has also had some "practical" implications in her life.

"It changed my approach to work and to the ways of looking for a job; it taught me time management as well, as we always had to work on tight deadlines in the College," she says.

Other alumni from last year's graduation currently work in France, Spain, Italy, Poland, Austria, Serbia, Croatia, Romania – but also Russia, Ukraine, the US, Ecuador or Uganda.