

# Student élite heading for high places

A SINGLE academic institution has had a greater impact on the European Commission than the rest of Europe in Bruges.

Other prestigious seats of European learning in Florence, Bologna, Amsterdam and Edinburgh have helped shape the thinking of EU officials. Yet Bruges has had the influence of 'Bruges', commonly known by those who come into contact with the college.

On the last count, almost 400 civil servants now working in the Commission spent one of their most formative years in Bruges. College of Europe graduates include Spanish Commissioner Manuel Marín. They can be found in 12 of the 20 Commissioners' posts and in every single directorate-general.

The majority harbours warm memories of much of the cultural mix as of the academic rigour.

It was an extremely useful experience of my work in the Commission. In 1965, this year was absolutely decisive, much for the technical knowledge I gained as for the experience of living and working with such a multinational and multicultural group of people," explains Hans-Joachim Lauth, now head of the Directorate-General for competition policy.

Since the college was established in 1962, 324 students have passed through its doors, with each annual promotion contributing to a prominent European. The first year at the college, 1965-66, was named after Thomas More and included students from 23 countries.

Since then numbers have grown considerably.

The annual intake in Bruges and its sister college of Natolin in Poland has increased to 320 and standards are correspondingly more demanding. But the guiding philosophy of the first rector, Erik Bruugmans, that "uniting Europe is a skill to be mastered and an asset never to be lost from sight" remains at the heart of the project to produce competent Europeans.

In terms of knowledge, many of the people who pass the *concours* now come from Bruges," points out Schaub. "A year there helps you to develop the ability to be more tolerant, to listen and understand cultures, and to have respect for diversity. People who have multicultural working and living

experience will find it easier to adapt to this strange place," he adds, referring to the Commission.

To the suspicious-minded, the fact that 368 administrative officials in the Commission went to Bruges, and that one-quarter of recent graduates now work for an EU institution, suggest that an efficient mafia has been built up based on a shared academic background. Schaub dismisses the notion.

"The fact that there are so many means that you often do not know if someone went there or not. Anyway, the real question is not whether you went to Bruges, but how well you got on when you were there," he argues.

Nevertheless, allegations of an 'old boy' network helping its own were given some credence a few years ago when one zealous former student in the Commission sent round a note urging colleagues to employ Bruges graduates whenever possible. Even dedicated College of Europe supporters now accept that the initiative was badly misjudged.

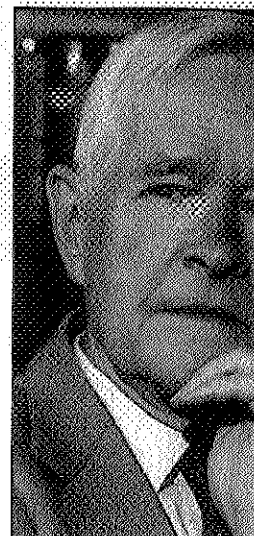
Still, there is no doubt that a year in Bruges can open doors and facilitate contacts. An analysis of more than 2,700

former students indicates that in addition to the Commission, other professional destinations include the European Parliament (52), Council of Ministers (23), European Court of Justice (23), Court of Auditors (21), Council of Europe (24), government ministries (236), embassies (88) and Brussels-based permanent representations (18).

In addition, almost 300 former Bruges students have gone into academia, more than 1,000 work in the service industries as lawyers, bankers, consultants or journalists, and a sprinkling are employed in other international organisations such as the World Bank and NATO.

Given the close family feeling which is nurtured at the College of Europe, it is not surprising that many still retain strong connections with Bruges after they leave. Three-quarters of all graduates are still on the college's regular mailing list and an active former students' association helps to keep the links strong.

Originally playing a mainly social role, the association now fulfils an increasingly practical function as an



Brugmans: uniting Europe

employment service which receives job offers for its members from the public and private sectors.

Would-be students often doubt about the benefits of Europe education.

"Thanks to the European education acquired at the College of Europe, students hold prominent positions in the economic, political, diplomatic and academic fields of over 100 countries," says the association.



College of Europe: nurturing young Eurocrats