Student elite heading for high places

A single academic institution has had a greater impact on the European Commission than the city of Bruges.

The prestigious seat of European institutions in Florence, Bologna, Venice or Edinburgh have helped塑造 the thinking of EU officials. Yet, Bruges has had the influence of 'Bruges', as commonly known by those who come into contact with the college. The last count, almost 400 'maitres' now working in the Commission spent one of their most formative years in Bruges. College of Europe graduates include Spanish politician Manuel Marín. They can count on 12 of the 20 Commissioners, or in every single directorate.

Majority harbour warm memories of the multicultural mix of the rigorous and traditional atmosphere. It was an extremely useful experience for my work in the Commission, this year was absolutely decisive, much for the technical knowledge of the European Commission. The experience of working with such a multinational and cultural group of people, explains Schaun, now head of the Secretariat-General for competition.

The college was established in 1954, with the annual pass through 1324 students. With each annual promotion to a prominent European, the year at the college, 1954-55, was after Thomas More and included seniors from 23 countries. The numbers have grown since then.

The annual intake in Bruges and the College of Europe in Poland has received 320 and standards are considerably more demanding. But the philosophy of the first rector of the College of Europe in Bruges, "It's a matter of skill and an" never to be lost from sight" as at the heart of the project to compete Europeans. Terms of knowledge, many of the people who pass the concours now from Bruges," points out Schaun. A year there helps you to develop the ability to be more tolerant, to understand cultures, and to have 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, suggests that an efficient mafia has been built up based on a shared academic background. Schaun 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, Council of Ministers, European Court of Justice, Court of Auditors, Council of Europe, government ministries, embassies (85) 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 employment service: it receives job offers for 11 from the private and public sector. Would-be students doubt about the benefit of the course and its value to European education.

"Thanks to the European Union, students hold prominent positions in the economic, political and academic communities over 100 countries," it was concluded.