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Interview with Thierry Monforti, College of Europe in Bruges

Maintaining excellence in an international environment

By Manon Malhère | Monday 17 January 2011

Created in 1949, the College of Europe is often regarded as the point of reference in terms of post-university courses specialised in EU studies. The centre has an international reputation and plays host to some 400 students from fifty or so nationalities on its two campuses: Bruges (Belgium) and Natolin (Poland). Totally bilingual (French and English), the course offers a choice of five master's programmes taught by well-reputed professors as well as professionals from the 'European professions'. Short courses designed to help people acquire targeted knowledge are also taught. Thierry Monforti, director of Academic Service (Bruges Campus) and director of the Admissions Office, sets out here the main aspects of the course policy, which is taught by the College of Europe in a multicultural context.

What is the ambition underlying the College of Europe's approach?

To describe our mission, I would say in response to you: to train specialists in European subjects. But, to be more precise - I'll take up your words, ie "the ambition" of the College of Europe - I would gladly borrow this definition from one of our former rectors: "To train responsible European citizens". The College of Europe is not, though, a propaganda body for the EU institutions. We are only partly financed by the European Commission, namely about 23% of our annual budget comes from there. A good 15% or so of the other funding comes from public authorities, from Belgium of course, but also from most member states and Switzerland. Their representatives all sit on the board. Finally, in terms of its statute, I would like to specify that the College of Europe is of university level but is not a university. We are a Belgian private law foundation. In addition, we only offer a master's taught for a year and not a full cycle of studies going from degree to doctorate.

How are the master's courses organised?

Our students are offered a programme which is a cross between Anglo-Saxon and continental programmes. There is a part of the programme, compulsory in the first semester, for which most of the classes are given, by departments of studies, in a 'continental' way. The teaching of these classes is accompanied by tutorials. Here is where a real discussion can take place between the academic assistants and the students. Sometimes there is also a part of the classes organised with discussions between the professor himself and the students. But this type of teaching continues to be closer to the continental than to the Anglo-Saxon model. In the second semester, it is

completely the other way round. The classes are organised in the form of seminars with a limited number of students, generally twenty or so, based on different specialisations. These are mainly preparations, including simulation games, working groups, 'papers' to be drafted during the course in addition to the thesis.

What about the short-term courses for professionals?

Alongside the general programme, training or 'know how' activities are organised by the Department of Development [...]. For example, we hosted thirty or so civil servants from the Italian region of Puglia, who came for a short but intensive course. In addition, a summer course is organised every year in July for international civil servants, sometimes national or regional, even for middle management from international companies who want to get an update on policies being conducted by the EU. You could ask me why the College of Europe, which is first and foremost a post-university institute, teaches such courses? The reply is simple: to ensure that we have additional income. It also strengthens the cohesion of the college in the sense that the visiting professors and our permanent professors from the college work together on these programmes.

How do you choose your professors?

Only 60% of our teachers are professors. The others are experts from the EU institutions, national administrations and from the private sector. The professors have annual contracts. For the other teachers who do not teach for a full post-university year, they generally provide about thirty hours worth of teaching time. Each of these courses is also subject to an evaluation in terms of content and the contract. As you know, the subjects evolve a lot and it may happen that a course is cancelled. When I was a student at the college, it was at the time of the Delors Commission's white paper on the 'big single market'. That was back in 1990. Paolo Cecchini, who was close to Delors and who had taken part in the white paper, was one of the teachers at the college. Well, at a given time, Cecchini's course did not make sense any more as the single market had been there since 1992. So, in 1994, we cancelled the course. This is a pretty obvious example but there are others. We also regularly come up with new subjects. There are changes every year. That also means that there is a rotation, I would say, of about twenty or so professors out of the 160 who teach every year [...] This gives us a lot of flexibility.

Does this flexibility differentiate you from universities?

The programmes are not decided on the basis of the professor but on the basis of the contents. It is only then that the teachers are selected. That is a big difference with university, where, sometimes, they are constrained by the permanence of professors. This protection is good in some ways for individuals but the college avoids this reasoning, which does not systematically guarantee high quality university teaching. The college's Achilles heel is perhaps that the professors, given their status as 'visitors', do not necessarily take part in a long-term piece of work. In addition, it cannot be said that the college is a research institute as is the European University Institute in Florence, Italy.

What is the main specificity of the College of Europe?

A student of the college cannot simply say "I've studied such and such subjects at the College of Europe, look at my ECTS credits and my level of excellence". No, the point that is just as

important is the capacity to manage a multicultural situation. It is all well and good to say one is European and is convinced of the usefulness of working in a multicultural society. One's aptitude to dialogue still then needs to be demonstrated and this does not necessarily have to be in a lingua franca. But it is also about understanding the reactions of the 'other' who belongs to a totally different cultural group. One can speak the same language and not understand one another. The college at least allows for this useful experience. And that is also what our former pupils or people who know the college appreciate. If people's academic or intellectual capacities are equivalent, they will have more confidence in someone who has already worked and lived in a multicultural society for a whole year. Bruges is a village. We are neither in Brussels nor in a very big European city. So we are in some ways obliged to stay in a group or end up not really existing. And, indeed, everything is done so that our students can discuss with each other, live and experience a multicultural life.

Where have your students tended to work after completing the course?

While 20% of former students are civil servants in the institutions, which amounts to a thousand people or so, 30% work in lobbying or in law firms. The majority of lawyers who come out of a legal studies department work in European business outfits in Brussels but also in Paris or London. As for their fellow students, some go to national or multinational private companies, especially in the banking sector. Others, around 10%, go back to national or local administrations. Yet others move into diplomacy. In this last case, of course, these are national jobs related to national admission competitions but there are nevertheless a significant number of former pupils, be that in Paris, London, Brussels, Rome or even in Lisbon. We have current ministers of foreign affairs who are former students of the college, such as the Finnish Minister Alexander Stubb. Finally, 5% of our former students have become either academics or experts teaching in universities or institutes specialised in the area of EU studies.

What advice would you give to students drawn to EU affairs?

Their training is of little importance as long as there is a desire to update their skills. University education is not just about following courses, succeeding in appropriating the subjects taught and obtaining the certificate. It is also making a link with day to day reality. You need to read the press on a daily basis and, here, students no longer have the excuse that magazines are expensive. They can read on the internet. I do not want to hear a student at interview say to me "Ah I wasn't able to hear the results of such and such a summit because I don't have the time at the moment to read the press". That is not a reply. One always has time. You need to know about current affairs, you must not limit yourself to classes as such, which do not offer sufficient breadth of knowledge. This is especially true in the area of EU studies because, by their nature, they are not maths or philosophy set in stone for a long period. We are talking about studies whose subjects evolve, where information comes on a daily basis. Research is therefore essential. I would add that, at a given moment, you absolutely need an Erasmus or to follow an extra course abroad, such as a one-year master's. These are excellent ways to familiarise oneself with another language and think in that language.