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AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

How the College of Europe brings a continent together

7 November 2013 | By [Matthew Reisz](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/author/matthew-reisz/) (URL=[matthew-reisz/1022.bio](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/author/matthew-reisz/)) | Page 1 of 2

New rector Jörg Monar discusses the unique institution's mission and challenges



Source: *Alamy*

Unique environment: 'students live Europe, with all its tensions, all the cultural barriers they have to overcome on a daily basis. It is difficult for big universities to create a similar framework'

Mention "the spirit of Bruges" and many British people will think about the famously Eurosceptic speech Margaret Thatcher delivered at the College of Europe on 20 September 1988 and the Bruges Group thinktank that has grown out of it.

The prime minister started by congratulating the organisers for their courage: “If you believe some of the things said and written about my views on Europe, it must seem rather like inviting Genghis Khan to speak on the virtues of peaceful coexistence!”

Yet she went on to warn that “Europe never would have prospered and never will prosper as a narrow-minded, inward-looking club” and also to claim that it was “folly” to try to fit different nations into “some sort of identikit European personality”.

Perhaps the most famous soundbite, however, was Thatcher’s statement that “we have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them reimposed at a European level with a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels”.

But at the college itself, and translated into French, the phrase “*esprit de Bruges*” refers to a particular atmosphere that enthusiasts claim makes the institution unique.

Jörg Monar, who took over as rector in September after a long association with the college, first came to teach there for a year in the early 1990s. Even then, he recalls, he had already “heard the myth of the *esprit de Bruges* and was very sceptical. But I could see over the year how it really transformed the students. At the final session, there were tears in many eyes because this was the last time they would all be together – which I hadn’t witnessed anywhere else.”

The college, a university institute of postgraduate studies whose alumni include Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg, now takes in 320 students at Bruges, and 120 more at its Natolin campus in Warsaw, Poland, for intensive year-long advanced master’s degrees in areas such as European economic studies and European Union international relations and diplomacy studies. They are taught in both English and French, largely by 180 visiting professors from across Europe and beyond.

Apart from the programmes themselves, Monar sees three additional elements, which are probably to be found together nowhere else, as crucial.

An intensive selection process, focusing on “motivation and personality as well as study results” (and often relying on national selection boards), ensures the calibre and commitment of the students.

Once they reach Bruges, the college’s study environment swiftly “transforms them into quite a closely knit body” through living together from breakfast to dinner while pursuing a challenging academic programme.

And there is also a significant package of extracurricular activities, with frequent visits to EU institutions, opportunities to play simulation games in the European Council buildings themselves and “a constant stream of senior officials, diplomats and politicians who come to the college to address the students”.

Europe, up close and personal

Although Monar spent 18 years working full- or part-time in the UK, most recently as professor of contemporary European studies at the University of Sussex, he claims that the College of Europe experience has an extra dimension that is missing from even the best master’s courses elsewhere: “Students live Europe, with all its tensions, all the cultural barriers they have to overcome on a daily basis. It is difficult for big universities to create a similar framework.”

The new rector has certainly taken over in interesting times. The troubles of the eurozone have led, he acknowledges, to “a fundamental crisis” and “a very reactive and sometimes depressed reaction among political elites in the member states”. A mood of austerity following the economic crash has put inevitable pressures on funding.

So although its graduates no longer go almost exclusively into EU institutions, does the college nonetheless embody a set of values now regarded with increasing scepticism well beyond diehard Thatcherites and members of the UK Independence Party? How can it revivify its ideals while also ensuring its financial future?