
To Brussels, on the gravy train

Justin Stares examines the influence of the College of Europe

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Looking for a well paid job-for-life in the relaxed atmosphere of one of the European Union institutions? That will be €16,000 (£11,000) please.

That amount of cash, a relevant degree and a suitable recommendation to the board of selectors will get you into the College of Europe in Bruges, food and lodging included. Once inside, your career on board the Brussels gravy train is more or less guaranteed.

Graduates of the one-year College of Europe masters programme have a far higher chance than anyone else of landing jobs in institutions such as the European commission and European council. They have been so successful that, after almost 60 years, the network of alumni in Brussels is now so dense it is more commonly known as the "Bruges mafia".

The European commission's top civil servant, secretary general David O'Sullivan, studied in Bruges, as did around 1,000 alumni who now occupy key posts almost everywhere you turn. Anciens (the French for alumni), as they are collectively known, run four of the European commission ministries through their directors general.

"Bruges graduates fill more than 30 of the 200 or so places in the cabinets of the incoming commission, including several of my own cabinet members," the commission president, Jose Barroso, said in his speech to this year's Bruges intake - the first speech of his mandate. "Bruges is not just a pole of academic excellence; it is above all a place of practical application - a rich source of tomorrow's Europe ... So when I say that many of you will be closely involved in shaping Europe's future, this is not an idle threat."

Student numbers have increased substantially since the college was founded in 1949, but this year there are still only 400 students, split between the two campuses: Bruges and Natolin, near Warsaw, which was inaugurated 10 years ago as a precursor to the EU's eastward enlargement. Since the second world war there have been only 8,200 College of

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Europe graduates. There are just four masters (MA) courses on offer: politics, economics, law and a law/economics combination. A limited number of government grants covering tuition, board and lodging are available in the UK.

Students are treated to courses run by frontline academics, lawyers and economists. The complexities of the EU's legal system are unravelled by the chief legal adviser to the European Council of Ministers. European commission officials are drafted in to give first-hand accounts of their experiences of negotiating EU enlargement or tense transatlantic relations. The resident professors and visiting speakers are premier league. Margaret Thatcher made her famous Eurosceptic tirade to students here in 1988, which became known as her "Bruges speech". Well-thumbed copies litter the library.

Lecturing takes place in French and English, a reflection of the languages most widely used in the EU institutions. Knowledge of both is required prior to entry, though there are cramming courses for those who need a little extra help.

Seminars are driven by the students and could cover subjects as diverse as the role of Nato within Europe and the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. The nature, scope and size of the EU have changed so rapidly that postgraduate research is often forward-looking. What are the advantages of a permanent EU presidency? How far can the EU expand without becoming ineffective? Where else can you discuss these issues over lunch with bright, enthusiastic youngsters from dozens of different countries?

Over the year, students will see this theoretical discussion put into practice during visits to the European Court of Justice, the EU's statistical arm Eurostat, and the European parliaments in Brussels and Strasbourg. By the time they graduate, many are able to recite the EU treaties by heart.

Even better known than the college's academic reputation is the fame of its students for socialising. In the aftermath of the second world war, the founding fathers of the EU decided warring nations would become friends again if their surroundings were pleasant enough. This philosophy of "friendship through decadence" lives on in Bruges and Natolin, and indeed arguably in Brussels today, where former students of the College of Europe have become well-paid civil servants with abundant benefits and holiday entitlement (the starting salary in the European commission is €3,800 a month - £2,620 - after tax). Students of the same nationality club together to throw parties with enough corporate sponsorship to ensure copious quantities of alcohol and food. The extravagance has been known to extend to the hiring of a castle outside Paris.

Statistically speaking, getting one of the highly contested places in Bruges or Natolin gives you a big advantage in the job market over other Eurocrat wannabes and aspiring Brussels insiders. When the European commission kicked off its most recent recruitment drive to accompany the enlargement to 25 states, there were thousands of applicants from all over Europe. Of the 700 who made it through the vigorous series of exams, more than 100 had studied at the college.

"This is a huge proportion," says Anne Draime, careers officer