

# Political Science and the Professions of Political Scientists: EU Officials

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When a former student once asked me whether the PhD helped me get the job I have today, I replied without any hesitation with a resounding “No”. Now that I am given the opportunity, I would like to elaborate further on how, in my personal experience, an education in political science was important for my job as an official of the General Secretariat of the EU Council and then of the European Commission. In doing so I would like to discuss both (1) the access to the European public service and (2) the daily work as an EU official. In addition it may be useful to say a few words on (3) how an EU official may interact with academia and vice versa.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Getting an EU job with a background in political science

The way I ended up working for the European Union has little to do, directly, with my decision, at the age of 19, to embark on a University degree in political science. At the time of making that choice the EU was hardly on my radar screen. Yet, it would be unfair to say that this choice has not played any role, albeit an indirect one. My interest in the EU came a couple of years later when, as an Erasmus student in Sweden (Uppsala University), I became fascinated by the academic and human diversity to which I was suddenly exposed. This was also when I was required to identify a topic for my undergraduate dissertation. At that moment, still under the influence of that Erasmus experience, I picked a research topic that would have allowed me to continue to enjoy that European flavour. This is how I ended up writing on the party system in the European Parliament. From that moment onwards – as a good illustration of path dependence – I never studied or worked on anything that was not related to the EU.

Yet that did not immediately translate into a job in the EU institutions. For about five years I continued to train as a political scientist specialising in various European topics. It was not at all clear to me, then, what I would do afterwards. I thus embarked on a master programme and then a PhD programme as if I were going to pursue an academic career. However, as the end of the PhD came closer, it became less obvious that I would seek a job

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\* The views expressed by the author are personal. They do not reflect necessarily the position of the Institutions in which he is active.

in academia as my ultimate goal. In the meantime, especially for personal reasons, Brussels had become the centre of gravity of my life and as a result I started to look for opportunities there. Having worked so much on the EU, the EU institutions became the primary target of my job hunt.

Access to the EU public service was (and still is) conditional on succeeding in an open competition whose main elements have evolved over time. When I sat that exam, the hardest part was a multiple choice questionnaire on verbal, numerical and abstract reasoning. The only part in which the education in “European studies” played a role was a subsequent written essay and the oral exam, which were specific to the field (European Public Administration and Human Resources). In subsequent reforms of the competition system, the specific knowledge of a field was replaced by an assessment of certain competencies, so that the specific knowledge of the EU and its policies became of secondary importance.

To summarise, studying political science made me interested in the EU, but working for the EU required (also) other skills that I acquired separately.

## 2. Working for the EU as a political scientist

Let’s start with the good news: far from being the dominant background, a degree in political science / international relations is common to many EU officials (approximately 15% of the total). Hussein Kassim *et al.* offer some interesting figures in their 2013 book on “The European Commission of the Twenty-First Century”, including the fact that an overwhelming majority (69%) have completed degrees in either social sciences or law, with economics and business comprising alone 29% of the total (p. 40).

Based on my personal experience, I found my education in political science well suited for many daily tasks in the EU institutions. Thanks to the wide range of topics it covers – from philosophy to statistics, from law to economics, from history to public policy – it makes you confident in many positions, especially those entailing coordination activities. In addition, with the recommendation for EU staff to change job after a certain number of years (usually five), a political science graduate is often considered well-versed to adapt to a new policy area and to new tasks.

At the same time, many EU jobs require specific knowledge and training that no political scientist, however versatile and skilled, can improvise or acquire “on the job”. Lawyers and economists, although appreciative of your efforts, will hardly take you very seriously in a discussion that concerns *only* their domain and will not spare you a condescending look if you ever try to venture into their waters. Interaction with other profiles such as engineers and scientists is more sporadic but subject to similar dynamics. Fortunately for political scientists, very few discussions are only technical or requiring just one kind of expertise, as there is always a political/procedural dimension that makes their point of view relevant and useful.

A separate issue is to assess whether a person with an academic background in political science – e.g. with a PhD and possibly research/teaching experience – is better equipped to work for the EU public service compared to someone without that same training. Here again, the answer is both ‘yes’ and ‘no’. Based on my experience, on the positive side, the PhD proved helpful on a number of fronts, for example to build a certain resili-

ence to stress, to work autonomously, to be rigorous on methodology, to have an eye for detail, to present arguments based on evidence and examples, to draft rapidly.

But there are also limitations. Coming from academia, I used to enjoy significant freedom, both of reflection and action. As a researcher, you define your own agenda, you can afford to have strong opinions and preferences on what you investigate and therefore you take responsibility (and credit) for your research. Moreover, I was also somehow trained to believe that, if I wanted to write on any issue, I was expected to get to the bottom of it, read all that had ever been written about it and scrupulously reference the work done by others when presenting my own contribution. Academia is a world where quality should prevail over speed: your work is only made public when it has reached the required standard level. This is epitomised by the long process to have an article published in a peer-reviewed journal.

It is of course very different when you work for a large organisation like the EU whose aim is to deliver public policies and where there is usually strong pressure to deliver quickly. To begin with, however important your role, you are only one part of a large machine whose direction is decided at higher levels. Secondly, you do not choose but are assigned tasks, such as drafting a speech, replying to a parliamentary question, providing comments to a new initiative that is being prepared. Third, you are not supposed to feed your personal ideas into performing your duties. In fact, you receive guidance on what should be the line to follow when attending to these tasks and on that basis you prepare your contribution, which is then processed by your hierarchy. You may not even be aware of the final shape of the contribution you worked on initially. Your gratification mostly comes from the recognition by your hierarchy (and possibly your aspiration to contribute to a project you believe in) rather than your external visibility.

Moreover, unlike what occurs in an academic environment, sticking to a deadline and consulting all those concerned is as important as and sometimes even more important than the actual substance of your contribution. Providing solutions to problems is the key priority and, sometimes, extreme focus on the detail or on hypothetical issues may be counterproductive and unhelpful (and will certainly not be appreciated). “Academic” is often said, almost pejoratively, about discussions that have got lost in secondary questions and are not helping to move a process forward.

Of course, these differences do not come as a surprise to those who choose to work for the EU but the transition from academia to the EU public service does require a mental shift that, if underestimated or overlooked, could lead to frustration. In other words, if you have joined the EU institutions because you were fascinated by the field of “European studies”, you may be disappointed to find out that not only does your daily job not entail discussing these topics, but that you may even lose track of the academic dimension of the EU institutions once you are embedded in their daily operation. You are so focused on your area of responsibility that you risk losing perspective.

### **3. Interaction between academia and EU public service**

Is it then all lost for erstwhile academics who end up working for the EU? Not entirely. In fact, one of the most dynamic aspects of the scholarly production on the EU is the close interaction between academics and practitioners. Over the years I have had the privilege to experience both directions of this relationship, with equally enriching results.

For my PhD (I wrote on the farm lobby in the EU) as well as for other research work, I benefitted enormously from the input and the viewpoints of the many EU officials I met and interviewed over the years. I have always considered the exchange of views with them as an inescapable “reality check” for the credibility of my work. More often than not, they challenged the ideas and hypotheses I submitted to them. They provided plenty of examples contradicting or invalidating my suppositions, shared different ideas and offered alternative interpretations of the same phenomena. The more I was into a topic and I could reply to their objections, the deeper the interaction.

Today, as an EU official, I am equally grateful for the value academics bring to my daily work when they reach out to me for their research. The questions they raise often provide a refreshing opportunity to look at my tasks from a different perspective and to put them in a broader context. As most of the work in the EU institutions is highly specialised, an external observer is – perhaps paradoxically – best placed to identify patterns that cut across policy areas and to understand their deeper implications, which may be less visible to the insiders.

The same benefits would come, of course, from regularly reading scholarly publications on the EU or from actively taking part in the academic debate through the many conferences and seminars dedicated to the EU. In reality, however, it is hardly possible to combine proper research activities with the ordinary workload as an EU official. Personal interaction is a more convenient and common way for academics and practitioners to support each other.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, there is a long tradition of EU officials engaging in academic activities, including teaching in academic institutions that offer graduate courses on the EU. There are also several examples of EU officials that present/discuss papers at academic conferences and publish books and articles in peer-reviewed journals. It is no coincidence that the first two books I bought for my undergraduate dissertation on the European Parliament were written by EU officials (and a Member of the European Parliament): the seminal “A modern guide to the European Parliament” by Martin Westlake and the popular “The European Parliament” by Richard Corbett (the MEP), Francis Jacobs and Michael Shackleton.

As a former academic who strives to keep up with the academic debate and to carry out some teaching activities, I am fully convinced of the mutual benefit of the academics-practitioners relationship and of their virtuous contamination. Academics and practitioners complement and improve each other in their respective endeavours and, together, they do a better job at understanding and explaining how the EU works than they would do separately.

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<sup>2</sup> The interaction between academic ideas and EU policy-making is of course a much broader and complex issue, which I cannot afford to address in any detail here. I would only highlight the many formal and informal opportunities offered to stakeholders, including academics, to contribute to the EU policy process as well as the evidence-based approach to policy-making embraced by the Commission, which often relies on the contribution of academics for studies, evaluations and impact assessments.