

# The European Commission in Question

## Policy Briefing

### 3/ Careers, career-building and mobility in the European Commission

#### Background

Career structure, recruitment practices and promotion procedures are important processes in any public administration. They play a key part in determining the levels and kinds of expertise available to the leadership, the prospects of career progression and career development, and whether the organization is representative of the communities it serves. How they work in practice, the scope for patronage in recruitment and promotion, and whether women's experience differs from men's also warrant investigation<sup>1</sup>, not only to assess whether they comply with principles of meritocracy and equality, but also because they affect staff morale. In the case of a multinational organization such as the European Commission, personnel policy presents particular challenges. Although the Commission administration is a permanent civil service, the requirements of a career-based service sometimes conflict with other imperatives, such as the need for nationals from every member state in all departments and at all levels of the service<sup>2</sup>. Such clashes are likely to be especially intense when new member countries accede to the European Union.

1 See EUCIQ policy briefing no. 4: Gender in the European Commission

2 See EUCIQ policy briefing no. 5: Nationality in the European Commission

#### EUCIQ findings

The European Commission in Question (EUCIQ) sought to investigate the recruitment and career patterns of officials once they have joined the organization<sup>3</sup>.

- A first concern is whether middle and senior managers generally make their way up through the ranks within the organization or if they are recruited directly into management positions from the outside. Although we find strong evidence of career-building among managers in the Commission, a significant proportion are external recruits.
- Second, we looked at the frequency with which officials move between Directorates-General (DGs) during the course of their careers. We find that on average officials are likely to have worked in two Commission departments.
- Third, we examined whether gender, nationality, party patronage, or service in *cabinets* – the private offices of Commissioners – have an impact on career progression. We find that, while gender does make a difference – though in a direction that is opposite to that anticipated – nationality, party patronage and *cabinet* experience have little or no significant effect.

3 See also EUCIQ policy briefing no. 1: The Backgrounds of European Commission officials



#### Resources and Further Information

- Contact Principal Investigator: [euciq@uea.ac.uk](mailto:euciq@uea.ac.uk)
- Project website: [www.uea.ac.uk/psi/research/EUCIQ](http://www.uea.ac.uk/psi/research/EUCIQ)
- Publication: [tinyurl.com/EUCom21stC](http://tinyurl.com/EUCom21stC)
- ESRC project: [tinyurl.com/EUCom21stC-ESRC](http://tinyurl.com/EUCom21stC-ESRC)

## Career-building and management recruitment

In the EUCIQ online survey, we asked respondents about their careers and their experience both before and after they joined the Commission. As a test of the Commission’s career-based system, we sought to discover what proportion of the managers in our sample (n= 593) had made their way up through the ranks (see Figure 1).

First, our findings show strong evidence of career building among middle managers (ie. Heads of Unit). Sixty-three per cent had served in a more junior role in the administration and 38 per cent in another middle management position. The picture for senior managers is somewhat different.

Fewer than half (43 per cent) of officials serving at the time of the survey as Director General, Deputy Director General, Director, or adviser had worked in a non-management post within the organization. Their current job was not necessarily their first in the Commission, however. Fifty five per cent had served in middle management and 41 per cent in another senior management position.

Second, it is widely believed that appointment to a *cabinet* offers a route for outsiders to work for the Commission and then to enter permanent administration in a senior position without having to sit the entrance examination (*concours*). Contrary to expectations, however we found that just over half of the *cabinet* members in our sample (n=86)

had worked in non-management roles and around a quarter (26 per cent) in middle management. Overall, a smaller proportion than anticipated had been recruited directly into a *cabinet* from outside the organization. This reflects, perhaps, the impact of a change in staff rules that make service in a *cabinet* less attractive than in the past by imposing a ceiling on the position to which members can be appointed in the services on exit<sup>4</sup>.

Finally, a minority of managers reported that they had not previously served in a less senior administrative role. In other words, their first job in the Commission was in management. This was the case for 9 per cent of middle managers and 15 per cent of senior managers. They include appointees recruited directly in the Commission as part of the recruitment exercise associated with the 2004 and 2007 enlargements that saw the number of EU member states increase from 15 to 27 (European Commission 2011). It illustrates how the model of the Commission as a permanent administration associated with is compromised by the need to command expertise from all EU member states.

## Horizontal mobility

Public administrations vary considerably in the extent to which mobility between departments is valued, encouraged and supported. As long ago as 1979 the Spierenburg Report, undertaken by the Jenkins Commission, identified the lack of mobility among officials as part of a wider career development problem in the Commission that disadvantaged both the administration and the individual. As part of a wider reform programme implemented between 1999 and 2005, measures including better career management were introduced in an attempt to improve movement between services.

The low level of mobility shown by our data suggests that these efforts have yet to transform mobility within the organization (see Figure 2). Forty seven per cent of officials have worked in only one DG and only a further 28 per cent in two. The average number of DGs in which officials in our sample have served falls just short of 2 (1.95).

<sup>4</sup> See EUCIQ policy briefing no. 6: The Changing Role of the *Cabinets*

Figure 1: Career building among senior managers, middle managers and members of cabinet

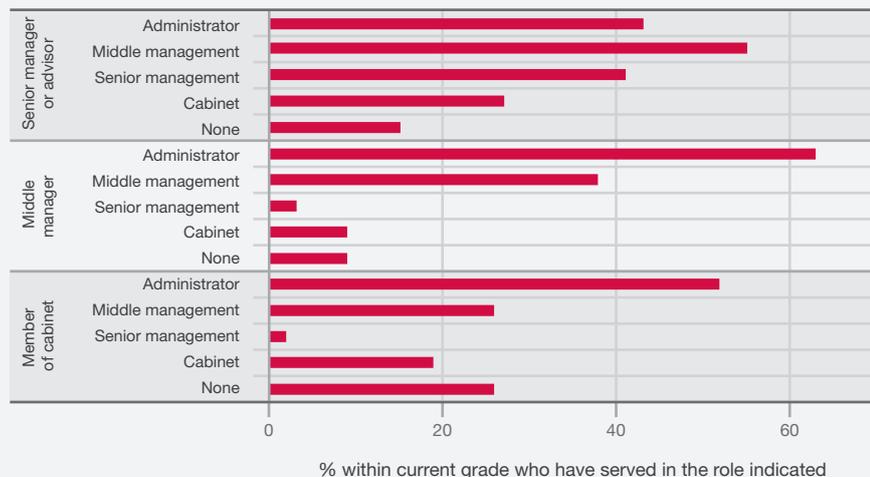
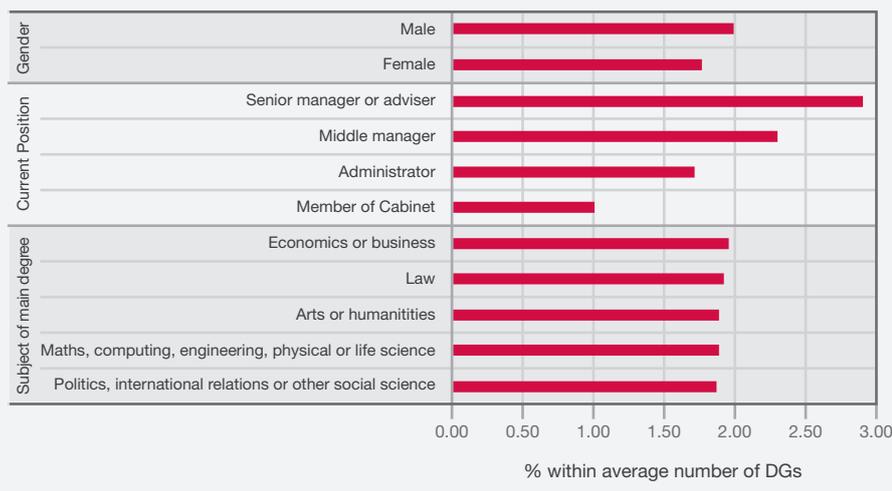


Figure 2: Mobility between Commission services by gender, level of seniority and field of study



Furthermore, there is a narrow range of variation for officials in the larger DGs. Officials in DG External Relations were the most mobile, having served in in 2.4 DGs. At the other end of the scale, officials in Research and Innovation, Agriculture, Competition, Environment and Health and Consumer Protection have worked in 1.7 or 1.8 DGs. There was also little variation between officials according to field of study (see Figure 2).

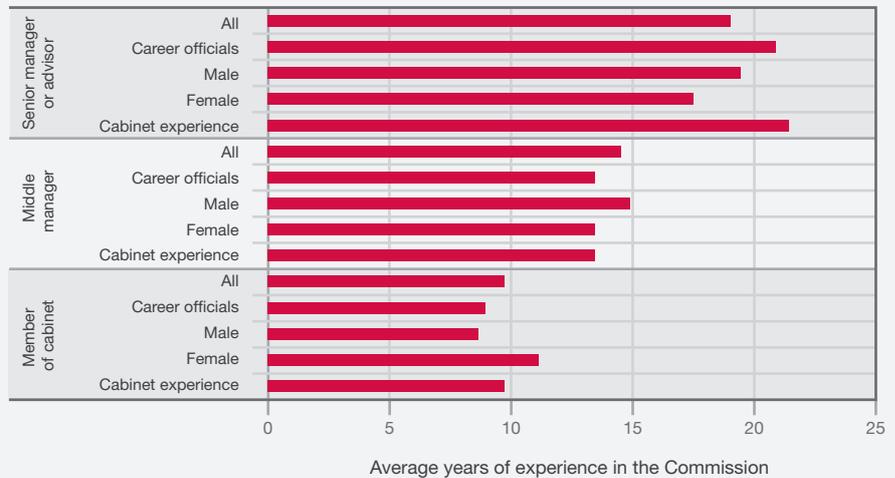
## Promotion

We also looked at career progression within the Commission with a view to examining whether factors such as gender, nationality, party or *cabinet* experience make a difference to prospects for advancement.

**Gender:** Comparison between the experience of male and female officials shows that, although there are significantly fewer female managers, the small number of women in management positions had been promoted more rapidly than their male counterparts (see Figure 3). Male senior managers on average served for 19 years before their promotion to a senior management role, but female senior managers had worked for 18. The differential among middle managers is slightly greater: men had served for 15 years and women 13 years. However, in both cases the greater speed with which women were promoted is largely explained by the emphasis placed on improving the gender balance in the recruitment exercise linked to the 2004 and 2007 enlargements. The gender position is reversed in the case of *cabinets*, however: women reported 11 years experience in the Commission and men 9 years before appointment to a *cabinet*.

**Nationality:** Using data from the online survey, we carried out a number of analyses to investigate whether officials from some waves of enlargement had progressed more rapidly than others. Once we adjusted for other factors, we found no evidence that nationals from some member states had advanced more quickly than others.

Figure 3: Length of service by gender among senior managers, middle managers and cabinet members



**Political party:** Party affiliation can be an important factor in recruitment or promotion in some national administrations. We sought to discover if the same was true in the Commission. Evidence from face-to-face interviews with managers (n=119) and members of *cabinet* (n=28) suggests that political partisanship does not play a significant role. No less than 70 per cent of managers and 54 per cent of *cabinet* members thought party affiliation unimportant for senior officials. With respect to *cabinets*, only 11 per cent of *cabinet* members thought party affiliation very important, 43 per cent that it sometimes plays a role, and 39 per cent that it is not very important or plays no role. Managers took a roughly similar view. This finding runs counter to the established view that Commissioners typically appoint trusted political allies from home to their *cabinets* when they move to Brussels.

**Cabinets:** A position in the Commissioner's private office was historically not only prestigious in itself, but provided a stepping stone into a senior position in the administration. In 2005 Siim Kallas, Commissioner for Administrative Affairs under the first Barroso Commission, revealed that for the Delors, Santer and Prodi Commissions between 15 and 20 per cent of top posts had gone to *cabinet* members. Analysis of the data from the EUCIQ online survey, however, showed that in general *cabinet* experience did not confer significant career advantage.

## Conclusion

The EUCIQ findings offer an important insight into the careers and recruitment in the European Commission. They confirm that the model of a permanent administration, envisaged by Walter Hallstein, the first Commission President, has only been partially achieved. Although there is strong evidence of career-building among managers, the Commission's status as a career-based administration has been compromised by the need to ensure the presence within the organization of officials from all EU member states across and at all levels of its departments. The findings also show that horizontal mobility within the Commission remains relatively low, although the measures introduced under the Prodi Commission will inevitably take time to produce their intended effect. Furthermore, analysis of the EUCIQ data shows that the experience of men and women in the organization do differ, but that party affiliation, nationality and *cabinet* experience are not significant factors in career progression.

Sara Connolly and Hussein Kassim

## About the Project

The European Commission in Question is an ESRC-funded project that examines the origins, backgrounds, and beliefs of officials, the internal operation of the organization, and attitudes to administrative reform and enlargement. Drawing on responses to an online survey administered to a representative sample of Commission officials in the autumn of 2008 (n=1901; n=1820 after iterative proportional fitting); and responses to a structured programme of interviews with Commissioners (n=5), cabinet members (n=28), and middle and senior managers (n=119, including 15 Directors General) conducted in 2009, it answers fundamental questions about one of the world's most powerful administrations.

For further information, see [www.uea.ac.uk/psi/research/EUCIQ](http://www.uea.ac.uk/psi/research/EUCIQ)

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## Coming soon

Kassim et al (2013) **The European Commission of the Twenty-First Century**, Oxford University Press  
[tinyurl.com/EUCom21stC](http://tinyurl.com/EUCom21stC)