

## Stocktaking of the first-ever certification procedure — interview with David Walker, director of the European school of administration

The end of the first certification procedure — an ideal moment to meet David Walker, director of the European Administrative School (EAS), the body that runs the certification training programme. We discussed some of the new and innovative aspects of the certification procedure and looked at what worked... and what can be improved.

### eas New and different exams

"We took the view that people who have been working in the institutions for many years have had their knowledge tested on various occasions. For us, it was important to test not what people knew but what they could do, their skills and their competences. Three of the four exams were skills oriented and indeed most of the training program was," said David Walker.

In the written exam, candidates had to analyse a large amount of documentation and make a proposal to show their ability to think and write clearly.

The oral exam was original; candidates were not asked questions but had to draw a subject at random — such as 'Will we have a cashless society in 20 years time?' — and, 15 minutes later, make a presentation to the Examining Board. In the second part of the exam, candidates had to prepare a speech based on a subject they got two weeks in advance, for example 'Does the concept of Europe have any limits?'

### Were the exams really necessary?

"Yes," claims David Walker, "for 2 reasons. First, when certification was introduced in the new staff regulations, it was seen by some as an easy way into the administrator category, through the 'back door'. Existing administrators could feel aggrieved by this. To avoid this, the director of

EPSO [European Personnel Selection Office, responsible for the exams with the EAS] and myself had to ensure that the level of certification exams was as demanding as external competitions."

Secondly, each of the institutions had a selection procedure for candidates, using more or less the same criteria. "But it is impossible to get such a selection 100% right. Inevitably there were a few people who don't possess the right skills to be good administrators. The exams act as filters. The number of candidates who have failed, larger than many expected, is an indication that the institutions might like to review some aspects of their selection procedures," suggested David Walker.

### Is certification a reward for past services?

"No," says David Walker. "Certification should be a way of identifying candidates who have the potential to have a normal career as an AD. I wonder whether the average age of candidates — nearly 48 overall — would allow this to be achieved. Some candidates have told me that they went for certification 'pour la gloire' — and this is not its purpose, in my opinion!" stressed the EAS chief.

### Is higher education really necessary?

Educational level is one of the criteria but institutions weighted it differently. The majority of candidates had university degrees. "But for me it is slightly irrelevant — merely possessing a university degree does not say much about your professional skills and abilities in a day-to-day work context. And this is what we are testing."

### The language issue

It did cause problems. The rule for everybody was that candidates could not follow the training programme or take the exams in their main language. David Walker met up with a number of candidates who were unhappy with how their 'main

language had been decided. Candidates' application forms were checked to see which first language they had declared when they first applied for a competition to join the EU institutions. "It was the only fair way to do it," said David Walker.

### The Examining Board

The members of the examining board — senior officials from all institutions — were appointed very late and had a challenging job because of the innovative nature of the exams. They had to assess skills, something many of them had not done before in an exam situation. The members of the board were trained on behavioural and skills assessment by the outside experts who helped the EAS develop the exams. "It worked and they had a very positive attitude," comments David Walker.

### Interinstitutional collaboration

"It's a triumph of interinstitutional cooperation, at all stages of the procedure, from the very beginning through to the examination process. This has been an example of best practice in cooperation between the institutions and I am proud of the role played by the EAS as a catalyst," concludes David Walker, enthusiastically.

- the specific modules will be dropped
- course-based training days — 30 instead of 40
- 10 days' individual exercises and assignments
- 2 blocks of courses (June and October) neither of which will be as long as the first block of 5½ weeks in 2006
- Nearly all Wednesdays off to help those on part-time