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EU-seful training

TJ talks to the head
of the new European
Administrative School

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EU-seful training

The new European Administrative School has just completed its first certification programme. **Elizabeth Eyre** talks to its head

When you are an organisation that spends €24.5m annually on providing training for 42,500 employees based in different countries, speaking different languages and doing a variety of different jobs, getting the best out of that training can be a challenge.

It can be even more challenging when, within the organisation, there are a number of groups delivering training. Ensuring that the quality of training is uniform, that it is all achieving the same strategic objectives, or is even just relevant can be a task bordering on the impossible.

The European Union (EU) has sought to meet those challenges by establishing a new training centre – the European Administrative School (EAS) – which runs alongside the training units already operating in the different institutions to provide L&D for all EU staff.

As well as standardising the training and development available to the people who run the EU's institutions (the Committee of Regions, Economic and Social Committee, Court of Auditors, Court of Justice, Council, Parliament, Ombudsman and the Commission), the EAS aims to promote cooperation and exchange of best practice among them.

The EAS was set up in Brussels in January 2005 and is run by Englishman David Walker, formerly head of the European Commission's training unit. It was established in response to a



growing awareness among the EU institutions of the need to train and develop their staff, and to complement the activities of the individual training units, with which the EAS works closely.

Walker was among the first group of Britons recruited to the EU at the end of 1973. He says there have been training units or small training sectors since the EU was founded: "L&D has been

dealt with within the institutions. Some have taken it more seriously than others. The way that training and learning has evolved has varied from one institution to another but there has always been a tradition of learning and development [within the EU]."

The EU originally mooted the idea of an all-encompassing training provider to eradicate the problems highlighted by the corruption

of the Jacques Santer administration of the 90s – a white paper was produced calling for training reform – but that has never been achieved.

One of the recommendations was the creation of “some kind of inter-institutional training centre”, said Walker, with the aim of training EU staff better to avoid the problems of the Santer administration.

“There have always been two schools of thought on whether the EAS should be an integral part of the administrative culture or a service provider offering courses across the institutions, giving rise to economies of scale and ensuring that all staff get the same training product.

“The way it was subsequently set up was very much as a service provider, and it’s been extremely successful as that.”

The EU says that offering training on an inter-institutional basis provides a number of benefits:

- the quality of training is guaranteed for all staff;
- people working in different institutions co-operate better and understand each other more;
- common values and best practice are spread among the institutions;
- there are economies of scale.

There are three main middle-management training programmes, focusing on soft skills, the actual tasks of management and self-management. An induction programme for new staff arriving in the institutions takes them through soft skills and “the kinds of behaviours and attitudes they need to develop in order to survive”, says Walker.

“The culture doesn’t vary that much between institutions,” he explains, “but the culture in the institutions is very different to that in general public government. We help new staff to prepare for life in a very different working environment than they are probably used to.

“It’s different because the EU institutions have evolved in their own way and rather separately from

Last year the budget for training within the eight EU institutions was €24,482,580. The total number of staff, both temporary and permanent, working for those institutions is 42,548.

everywhere else, because of their special membership and their special roles. People often forget that, when they were first set up in the 50s, the institutions were very small. Most people knew each other and there was a very strong streak of the European ideal present in people – when you’ve got that kind of background, organisations are going to develop in a very special way.

“That sort of militant Europeanism is not as strong these days but the EU still has its own characteristics.”

The EAS also runs a training programme for candidates for certification: a new procedure enabling people to be promoted from assistant to administrator. The EAS has been made solely responsible for running the procedure to ensure that it is the same for all staff from every EU institution.

The procedure was introduced when the working conditions of EU administration staff were changed in 2004. “For once, I think the institutions are ahead of the game in the training field with this,” says Walker.

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The certification programme enables each of the institutions to identify a number of people working as assistants – the executive grade in the UK civil service – as having the potential to become administrators (the policy-making managerial grade) using criteria that is ‘more or less the same’ across all the institutions.

Once selected, candidates embark on a compulsory 30-day

training and learning course, during which they have to successfully complete individual assignments and pass four exams to be eligible for an administrators’ post when one becomes available.

“It’s all skills-focused, which is extremely innovative for the EU institutions,” Walker says. “The usual recruitment procedures are knowledge-based so the nature of the training and exams in this procedure is extremely innovative.

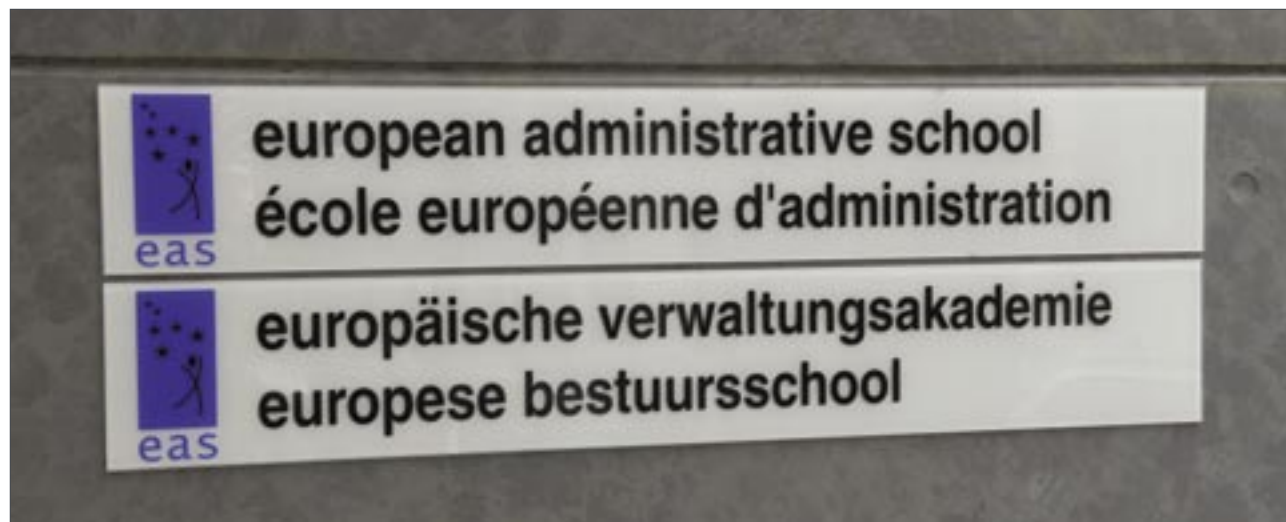
“We wanted to cover skills that would be useful for whatever institution – a classic mix of soft skills and analytical skills, creative and innovative thinking to solve problems, effective communication, negotiation skills, a series of personal effectiveness skills. A very wide range of skills is very rigorously tested.”

The first examination is an assessment centre, where people work in a group of six and are given some documentation containing a problem to be solved. They are assigned a particular role or given a particular position to defend in a group discussion, and are assessed on discussion, behavioural and competency indicators – the first time that the EU institutions have adopted this assessment method.

The second examination comprises a 10-minute presentation. Candidates are given the topic a fortnight before the exam and are questioned afterwards in the same way they would if they had given a speech to an audience.

There are a further two written examinations.

“The statement that all this makes is interesting,” says Walker. “For the first time in the history of the institutions, a declaration has been made that we will invest in a number of staff who can progress to a higher grade. In the past, it was up to individuals to prepare as best they could for progression. Now there’s a process that starts with institutions selecting staff, training and testing them – it’s quite a powerful organisational tool and an



extremely motivational tool too.”

The new process is extremely motivational for the people chosen to attend the course, perhaps, but not so motivational for staff in general. One group of potential administrators have been on the course so far, and a new one is about to begin, and Walker says some staff feel that the opportunities for them to develop their careers have been reduced because of the new selection process – which has replaced the traditional internal competition system.

But the number of people going through the new, annual process is larger than it was during internal competition.

Says Walker: “Not all of the institutions did the internal competition, and the numbers of people that would be let through would vary according to the number of posts locally to be made available.

“I got through one of those internal competitions 20 years ago. There were 38 staff within the Commission who got through that year; this year there will be about 84 or 85 Commission staff who get through the new procedure.”

It ‘made sense’ that management would play a more active role in selecting people for promotion in the certification programme. “I think that’s right. If you’re selected, you have a much better chance of

“It’s all skills-focused, which is extremely innovative for the EU institutions”

getting through than you would with the internal competition – it was a lottery. Now the odds have increased dramatically.”

One criticism of the certification programme was that it tended to favour people who had worked for the EU for a long time. Its aim, however, was to identify people who had the potential to progress and were at a stage in their career where they were able to do that.

“I’m extremely pleased with how the first certification programme has gone – everybody’s pleased. There’s been a great deal of scepticism about whether the School could deliver and also scepticism about whether the system would deliver,” says Walker.

He admits that the first course’s failure rate of 31 per cent was higher than expected but says the 98 per cent satisfaction rate among the candidates was “amazing”.

“Everybody stayed the course. We had an almost 100 per cent attendance record on all the exams. That is testimony to the fact that

people felt that what was being done was being done effectively.”

Attendees from the course will be monitored and one of the programme’s performance indicators will be the speed at which they are appointed to administrators’ posts.

“If they are regarded as genuinely good administrators, they should be appointed pretty quickly. We’ll also be embarking on a more ambitious plan in the long-term to identify them, follow their progress in terms of their career development and appraisal reports, and compare them with people who are recruited directly,” says Walker.

“L&D is very much alive and kicking within the EU. It is recognised within the institutions as an integral part of organisational and personal development. It is an integrated part of the annual appraisal process – training needs are identified and, in a number of institutions, individual learning plans are monitored and developed. By and large, the current state of play is pretty good.”

Although L&D was “vital”, Walker cautioned against thinking it could solve all an organisation’s problems. He concluded: “Hand in hand with the recognition of the value of L&D, here in the EU there has been the recognition of the danger of seeing a problem and just throwing training at it.” ■