

## Connecting EU institutions to lifelong learning

Interview with Anna Smedeby, Acting Head of the European School of Administration

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Anna Smedeby

Soon after the European School of Administration (EUSA) was established in 2005 the ECA started cooperating with it, having ECA staff participate in training organised by the EUSA or have the EUSA...organise training specifically for the ECA. What does the EUSA actually do for the ECA and others and what is its perspective on training and professional development? Anna Smedeby, heading EUSA since early 2017, sheds some light on these questions... and more.

### Lifelong learning as a strategic must

Lifelong learning has been around for a long time, and for Anna Smedeby it is a key objective of the European School of Administration (EUSA) to transfer and promote this concept in the EU institutions. 'In the private sector many companies have integrated this concept into their organisation, while in the EU institutions it was for a long time seen as a label which is nice to use, but not always put into practice. Sometimes we still deal with learning, through training, as something you do if you have time, or get as a reward. But it actually is a strategic must!' Anna points out that the way society is developing learning is becoming more and more important. 'And not only learning, but even more the ability to learn, the ability to quickly pick up new things.' She adds that in many organisations learning is still oriented towards skills. 'But sometimes, like the ECA now has with its cooperation with the University of Lorraine for this master programme, it goes beyond skills.' Anna prefers to talk about learning rather than training. 'Although often you see more training than learning.'



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Anna herself has made a learning journey throughout several EU institutions. Having started in the Swedish translation service in the European Commission in 1995, in 2002 she moved into human resources, getting familiar with career guidance and job descriptions in the predecessor of the current Directorate General for Health and Consumer issues. She moved to the Council doing similar tasks. There she saw the EUSA being set up, starting with Certification, the programme enabling EU staff to move between different career grades (from assistant to administrator level). She changed to the EUSA, first working on Certification. For the last ten years, she has been working on leadership issues, setting up the Leadership Club, followed by the Programme for Newly Appointed Directors in EU institutions. Since January 2017 she is Acting Head of EUSA.

## Interview with Anna Smedeby, Acting Head of the European School of Administration *continued*

The **European School of Administration (EUSA)** was set up by the institutions of the European Union in 2005 in order to extend the range of learning and development opportunities available to their staff. Administratively EUSA is connected to the European Commission and is funded by the EU budget.

A major reason for setting up the school was the need for a neutral body to organise the certification programme, which still is the EUSA's exclusive competence. Certification is a core element in lifelong learning at the European institutions, which enables EU-staff to progress from assistant level positions to administrator level positions.

The EUSA's other training activities fall into the following groups:

- induction training for new staff
- training in the basic skills needed in the workplace
- management and leadership development programmes
- wellbeing workshops

The EUSA has offices in Brussels and Luxemburg and is organised in two sectors: one for the design, development and evaluation of training activities and the other for planning, organisation and customer relations.

Many of the team have a previous background in training and training management. Its total staff is 22.

### Skills and competences

Anna touches upon another thing about learning. 'This is about reflecting on your practice. And that does not neatly fit in into the usual categories. Yes of course we need to talk about skills, which you need to learn, like writing, giving presentations. But we also need to talk about competences: which ones are you promoting as organisation? Are you recruiting for competences, and what are you looking for to promote people?' She raises the question whether, as organisations, we are more focused on current skills, or if we also think of future oriented competences, like the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the OECD, highlights in a 2017 report called 'Skills for a High Performing Civil Service.' This report indicates that new skills and competencies are necessary to address the future challenges of the public sector, speaking about things like critical thinking, innovation, flexibility. We are not looking at that all that much yet.'

Anna points out that this goes far beyond the usual 'let's sit down and do a course about IT skills.' Anna: 'We are trying very hard to bring the learning into the workplace: the 70 – 20 – 10 distribution. Perhaps a bit of a dull model, but official policy in the Commission, and massively used elsewhere, too.' She explains that 70% of what we learn is on the job, while doing something. 20% of what we learn is from feedback. And only 10% is actually in a traditional classroom - or e-learning - situation. 'We work more and more to bring the 70% into our learning, and it is particularly evident in our new management programmes.' She points out that this means breaking up programmes, doing one day of short and sharp interventions. Then participants go back to their work place, try to put this or that into practice. 'Then, like 6 weeks later there is a new meeting day for the participants, discussing what worked well and what did not. So the aim is to have a more constant exchange and therefore create an incremental process of learning.'



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### Interinstitutional as added value

When speaking about the specific added value of EUSA Anna is very clear: 'EUSA is interinstitutional, a crucial point! The feedback EUSA gets from people is that one of the greatest assets of attending a training of the EUSA is that they meet people from other institutions. You then see there is a commonality, thereby helping to reinforce the identity of the EU civil service.' She adds to that opening up perspectives to move to another institution. For Anna the 'learning from each other' is of key importance. 'EUSA is also bringing in more and more context into its learning. Beforehand we were more focused on process and skills. Now we bring in both more content and context, like in the new 'EU in the making,' a programme for managers where high-level practitioners from the different institutions explain what really happens behind the closed doors in the EU Council, for example.'



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As to the question on how Anna finds people to provide such learning opportunities she smiles: 'I have very persuasive staff, and the programme is selling like hot cakes: it is extremely popular. People really want this. And it is in a lunchtime conference format. Sandwiches are offered, doors are closed and then you can have a good conversation, under Chatham House rules.' Anna beams when speaking about 'her' school: 'We are small but it also means that the school can be agile and do things quickly.' Important for finding out which 'learning' is needed Anna explains are also external sources: 'Like the Interinstitutional Working Party, consisting of the heads of training of the different institutions. We meet about every two months. Recently we identified a need for a course on teleworking, covering how you, as manager, can best manage your teleworking staff. The course is now under development and will be available by the summer.'

Another source for 'learning needs' are the consortia the EUSA works with. 'We ask them to talk to their trainers. After all, they are in the training rooms and they pick up what we might not pick up.' For Anna they are the ones who see what is happening with the people in the course. Anna: 'But most importantly we have, within EUSA, a team of designers: they are specialised in learning design and evaluation. They look at what is going on inside the institutions and outside in the world: identifying trends, issues in Member States and beyond.' Through the EUSA programme for Newly Appointed Directors Anna also gets feedback on what is important for managers. 'Agility, ability to learn, communication skills, ability to work in a transversal way. And this transversal approach, which you already do in the ECA, is going to happen much more, allocating resources where there is a specific need, regardless of a specific organisational structure.' Anna describes this as a more collaborative style of working. 'And necessary to boost innovation.'



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### Facilitating the ECA to pick and choose

When discussing what the specific advantages are for the ECA of using EUSA over other schools focusing on public administration, like for example EIPA, Anna does not have to think long: 'I believe the ECA uses all the options that are out there, like learning possibilities offered by universities, EIPA, or going interinstitutional through EUSA.' She explains that with EUSA the ECA can pick and choose: 'One of the courses developed by EUSA is the Team leadership course, specifically tailor-made in house for the ECA and for which the ECA pays. Another example is the teleworking course: perhaps a need the ECA has, which is shared by other institutions. EUSA can then develop something for the institutions and ECA staff can participate. For free!'

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Another issue Anna refers to is the economies of scale and the contribution to efficiency and effectiveness. 'The EUSA does framework contracts, organises the call for tender for, for example, induction courses. So that not each institution has to go through the same procedures, thereby saving a lot of time.' She explains that now, once there is a framework contract done by the EUSA, the ECA can go directly to the company providing the learning services and order courses itself. 'So you can pick and choose, deviating from what the school is offering, while not having to deal with all the administrative stuff. And the school can help, if you want, with advice and expertise, for a small cost.'



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### Engaging to Learning & Development

Anna thinks it is very important that the organisation truly engages in the learning and development strategy. 'It sounds like a cliché but it is such a strategic plus to have the right skills available. There is room for more organisational engagement in the Learning & Development of staff. And we at EUSA are seeing that more and more.' She mentions the ECA Team leadership course as an example of how an organisation should be investing in its people. Another example she gives is the Commission's Female Talent Development Programme, which EUSA assisted in designing. 'So the Commission is running it itself but also integrated some of the EUSA programmes.' Anna is a great advocate of integrating Learning & Development in career development: 'Look at where the potential is, what the organisation's needs are, and what action is needed to make these meet.'



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Anna explains that trainers used by EUSA have to fulfil several criteria: 'We work with companies through the framework contract. And every trainer we use has been accredited by the School. Never is a trainer put out in a training room who we have not accredited.' She adds that accreditation means that the trainer has to deliver a short session to a panel of EUSA and institution staff. And the content they present is screened, reviewing whether a trainer can manage the process well. 'And finally there are of course the "regular" evaluations from participants after each session. EUSA monitors these carefully, particularly for new programmes, or when new trainers have started. So if new trainers start usually EUSA staff will come and attend that course. It is extremely important that the trainers we accredit are very good because they are the School's face outwards!'

### Training and impact

As far as impact of training is concerned Anna gives a very concrete example: 'Certification, moving from one staff category to another. You can monitor how many people get nominated as administrators. And what is nice is to see them then come back in a course like 'Newly Appointed Head of Unit'. You can then follow them along their career.' She then refers to the Newly Appointed Directors course, which recently started its 10<sup>th</sup> round. 'We have around 200 senior managers of the EU institutions that have gone through this programme. This means that EUSA has actually trained between one third to half of the population of directors in all institutions together. And some have already moved on to become (deputy) Director General.' For Anna this means the creation of a great network with a common language and common experiences. 'This is really important because you create an interinstitutional network, making cooperation so much easier.'



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She continues saying that EUSA recently started doing impact assessments. 'A few times per year we will send out a survey to participants in our programmes, normally a few months after the end of the programme, asking: did they learn anything; was what they learned useful for their job, and are they able to put this into practice in their own organisation?' She explains that the first results, published in the EUSA 2017 annual activity report, are very positive: 'Positive feedback for management courses was at 89%, for key skills training it was at 87%.'

### Face to face plus the ATAWAD concept

For the future Anna hopes that the cooperation the EUSA always has had with the ECA in Learning & Development will continue. 'We really appreciate the relationship we have with the ECA. And the ECA can be rather specific in some needs, this in view of its specific audit profile. We will keep on having the same mix of tailor-made courses and interinstitutional offerings.' She also thinks that the limited resources available for Learning & Development can stimulate EU institutions to cooperate to find even more synergies.

While Anna believes Learning & Development has a really good outlook for the future, she thinks it has to become more innovative. 'We will have to do things in a different way, using the latest knowledge in neuroscience and behavioural science, probably shorter and sharper interventions, and in a different way.' According to Anna it will be a world of extremes: 'The face to face learning is never going away. People want it and there is a need to meet and talk. At the same time, there is an increasing place for the ATAWAD concept: any time, any place, any device.' She adds that this will happen through apps, short videos, pep talks, animations, etc. She concludes: 'We will see many changes in the upcoming years. But just electronic learning by itself will not be enough. You will always need the personal exchange with people, for social learning and more.'



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