

The European Commission Where now? Where next?

Research Briefing 2: 'An administration of lawyers'?

What are the educational and professional backgrounds of Commission staff? Is there evidence for the stereotypes?

Background

The European Commission is often portrayed as remote and out-of-touch. When described as 'an administration of lawyers', the implication is that the Commission is formalistic in outlook, and that it lacks the range of expertise, the right experience, and the creativity necessary to confront the challenges that confront the European Union. According to another accepted wisdom, the people who work for the Commission are career civil servants, who have little experience outside the Brussels bubble or beyond the public sector. In this short briefing, we look at the actual educational and professional backgrounds of Commission staff

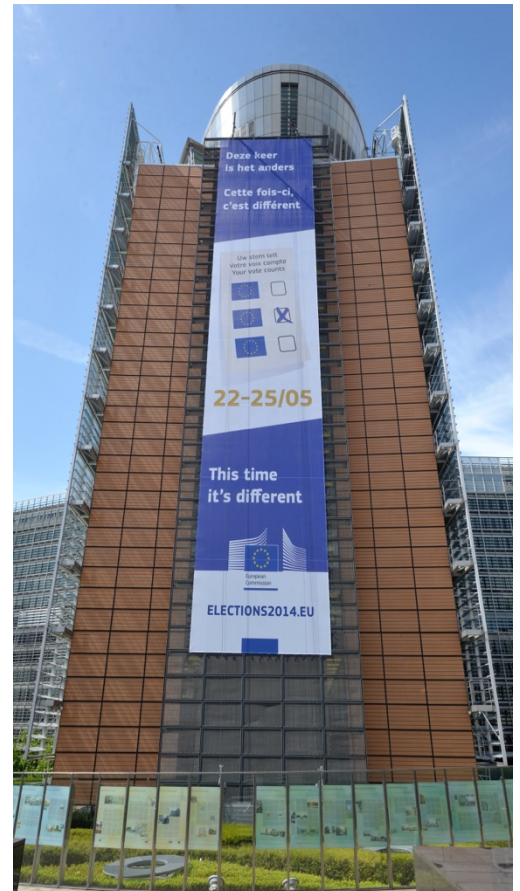
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In the online survey administered to all staff as part of 'The European Commission: Where now? Where next?', we asked respondents about their

levels of educational attainment and the subject of the highest educational qualification. As in our earlier projects, we found that staff are highly educated (Figure 1). More than 60 per cent hold a post-graduate degree and 15 per cent a doctorate. The level of educational attainment had increased since our first study in 2008 (Figure 2).

Moreover, a high percentage of staff had studied abroad (Figure 3). The share of staff who have been students in countries other than their home state is rising, and there is a tendency to spend even longer abroad (Figure 4).

The subjects most widely studied are politics, business, economics and law. The order of subjects studied has remained unchanged since 2008 (Figure 5). Business or economics still preponderates, but by an even higher percentage than in 2008. STEM subjects remain second and law third. Politics or international relations is still in fourth place, but a significantly higher percentage of staff are now graduates in this field (Figure 6).



For further information:

Project website:

<https://www.uea.ac.uk/political-social-international-studies/research/the-juncker-commission>

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Figure 1 Levels of highest qualification

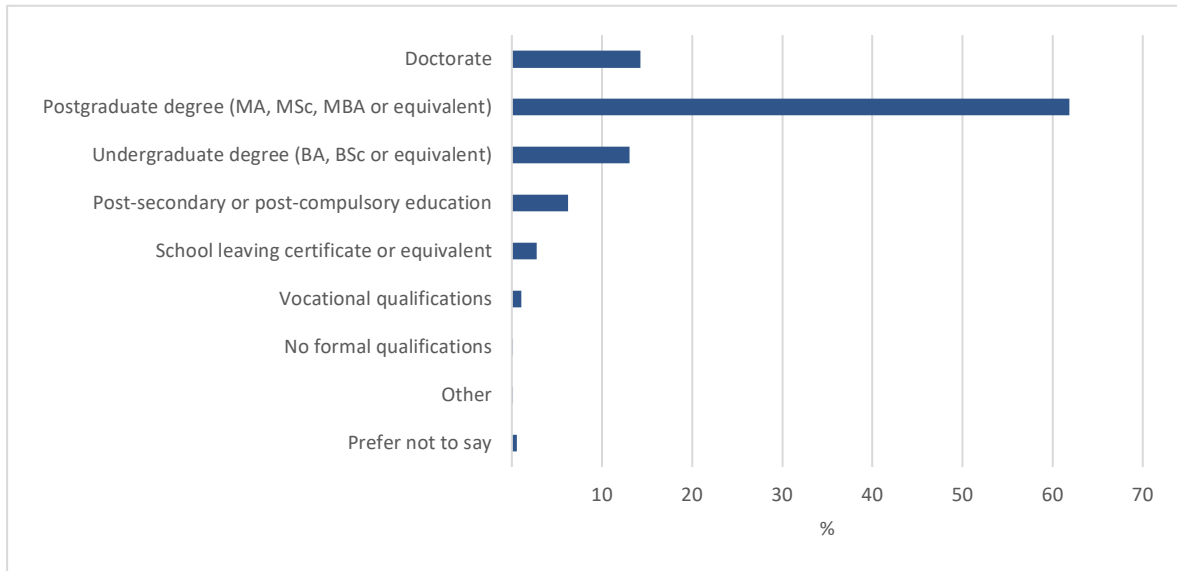
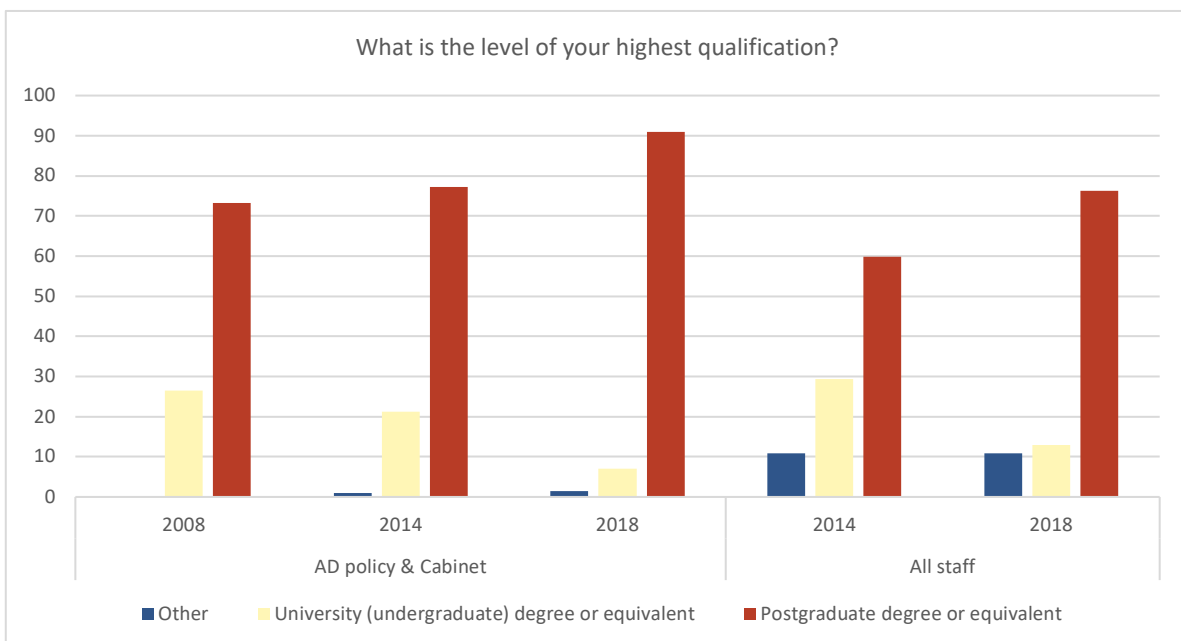


Figure 2. Level of highest qualification 2008, 2014 and 2018 compared



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Figure 3. Study abroad

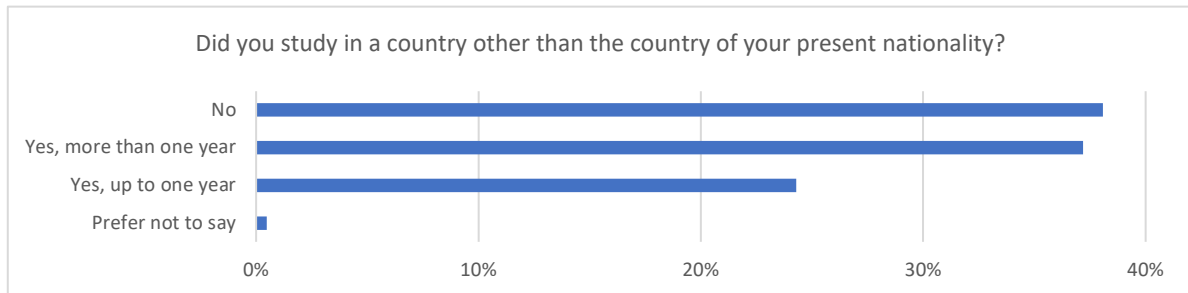


Figure 4. Study abroad 2008, 2014 and 2018 compared.

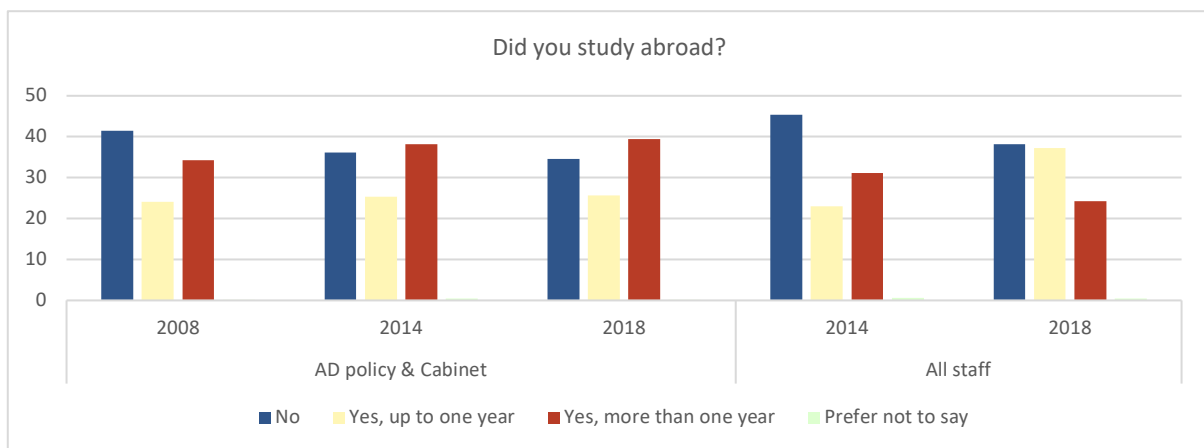
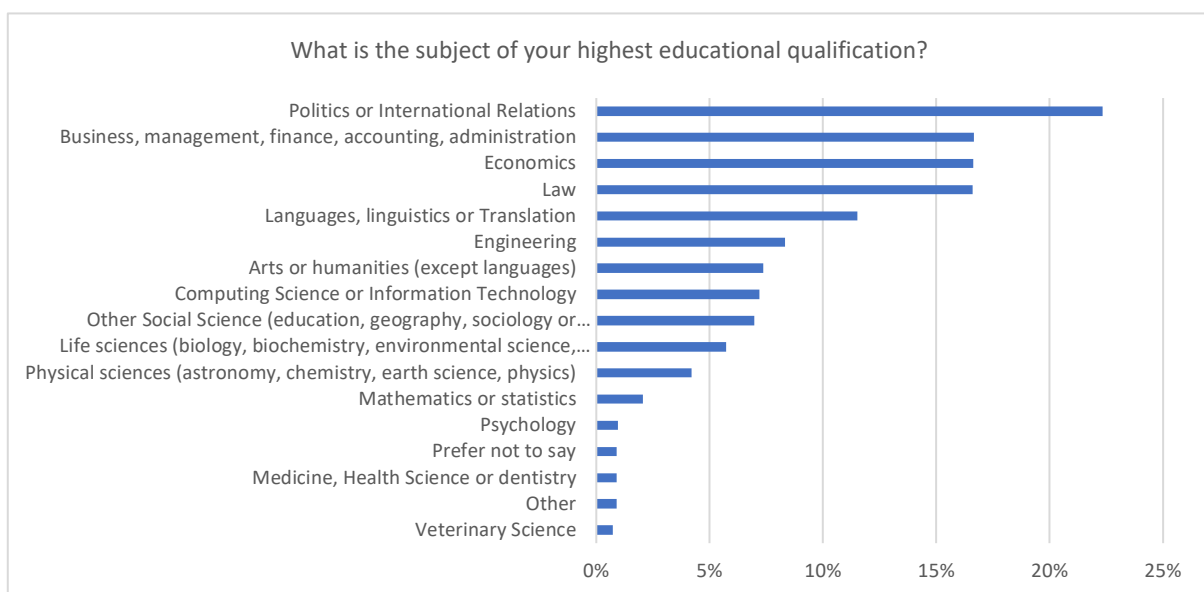


Figure 5. Subject of highest qualification



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Figure 6. Subject of highest qualification 2008, 2014 and 2018 compared

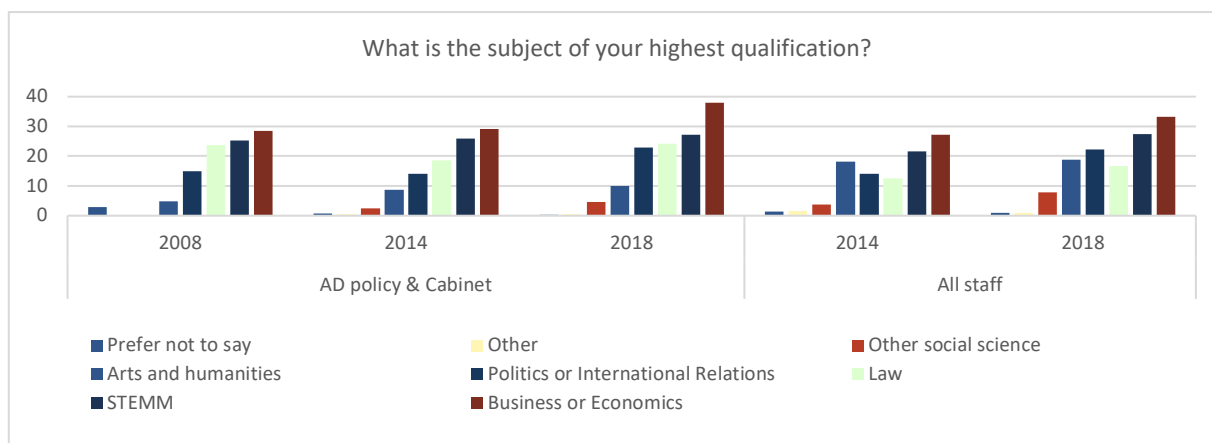
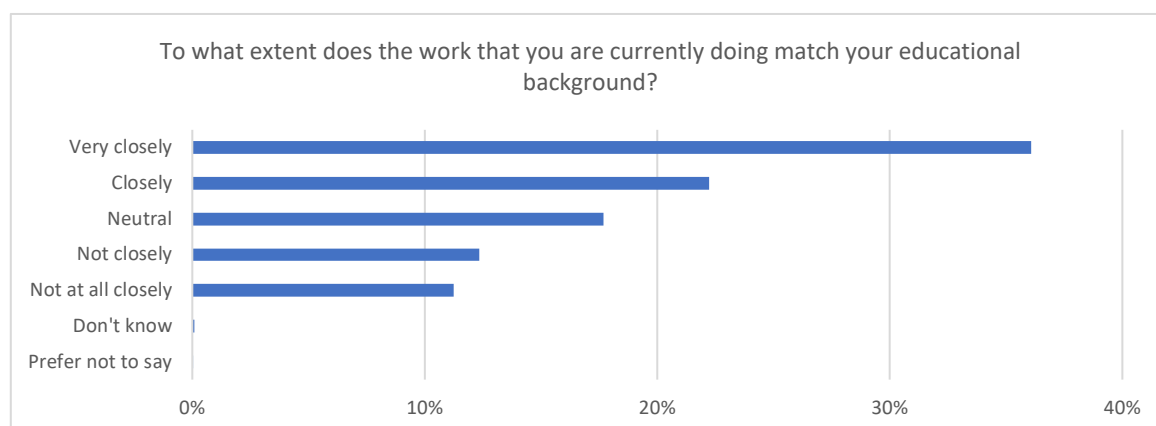


Figure 7. Match between current job and educational qualification



Arts and humanities stay in fifth place, but graduates from these disciplines are present in greater numbers than in 2008.

Just under 60% of respondents agree that their educational background matches the work that they do currently (Figure 7). However, just under a quarter report that the match is not close or not at all close.

Professional backgrounds

An accepted wisdom about Commission staff is that they have little experience of the world outside Brussels and none outside the public sector. We find, however, that fully 97 per cent of staff worked elsewhere before they joined the Commission. Moreover, staff have typically spent between three and seven years in previous employment, depending on staff category.

One of the most surprising findings from our 2008 project was the discovery that more than a third of Commission staff had a background in business. In 2018, the proportion is even more striking: fully 46 per cent of staff have worked previously in the private sector. While in 2008 they were slightly outnumbered by staff from public administration, a decade later this is no longer the case.

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Thirty-two per cent of our respondents reported that they had worked in the public sector (Figure 8). A background at University or

in research institutes is third in the list after the private and public sectors. The percentage among policy officers increased in 2014,

but had fallen back in 2018, while among all staff it also fell slightly (Figure 9).

Figure 8. Professional experience prior to joining the European Commission

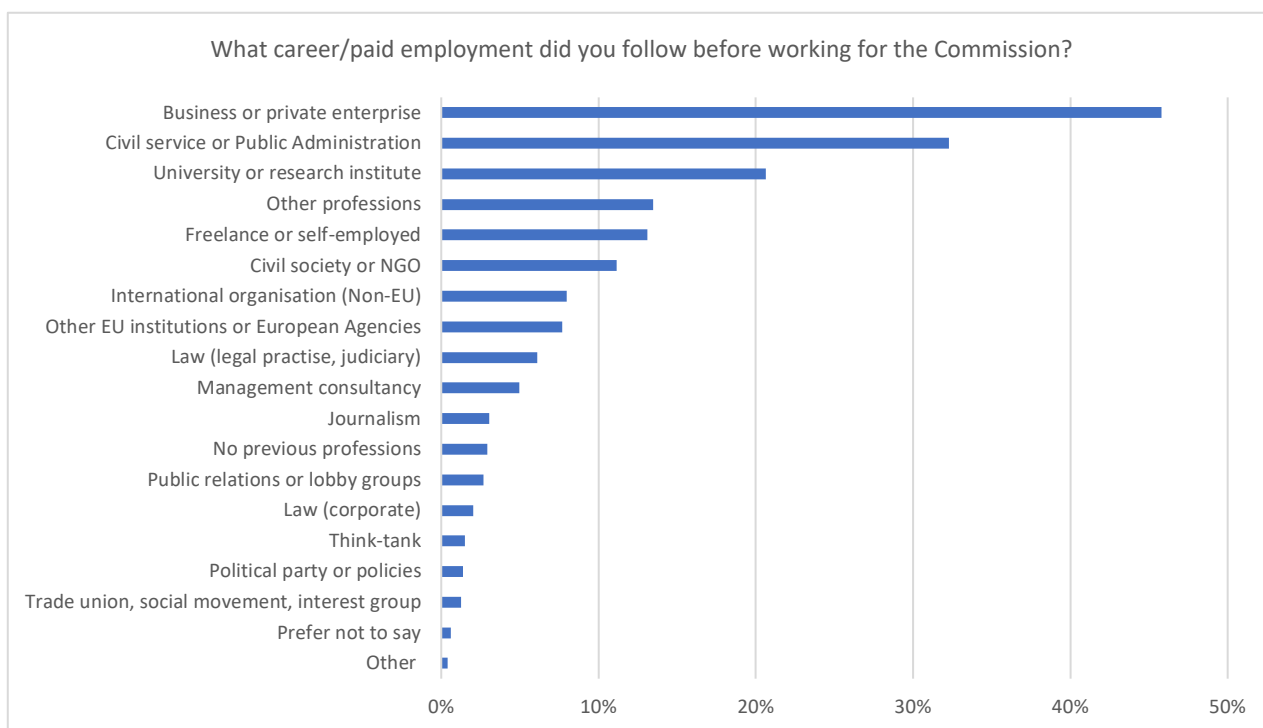
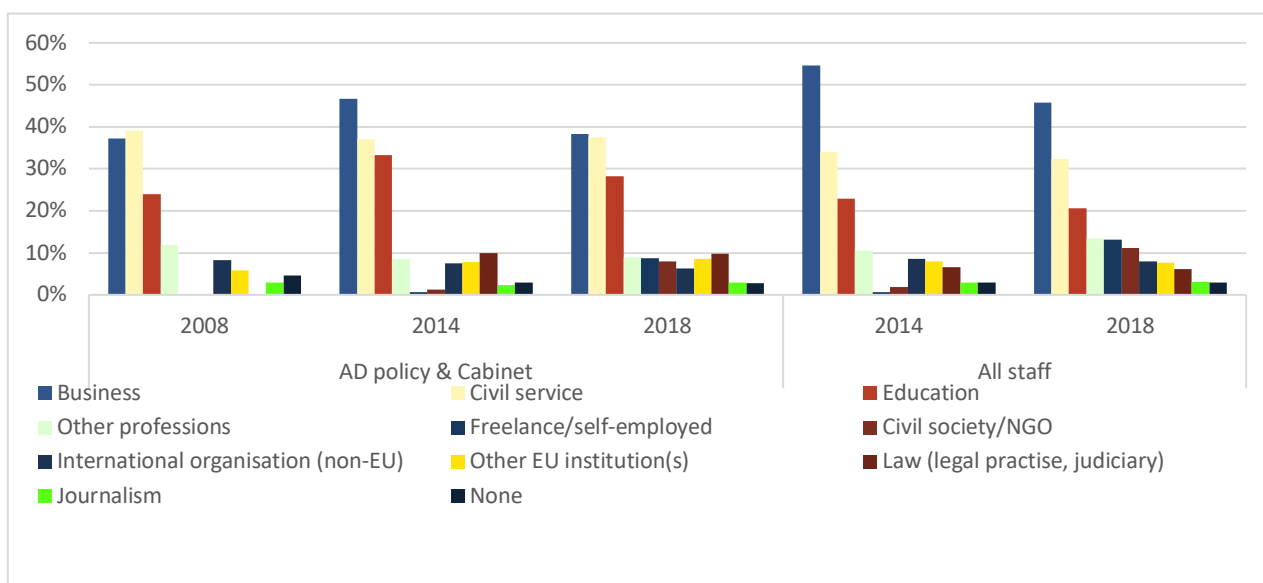


Figure 9. Prior professional experience 2008, 2014 and 2018 compared.



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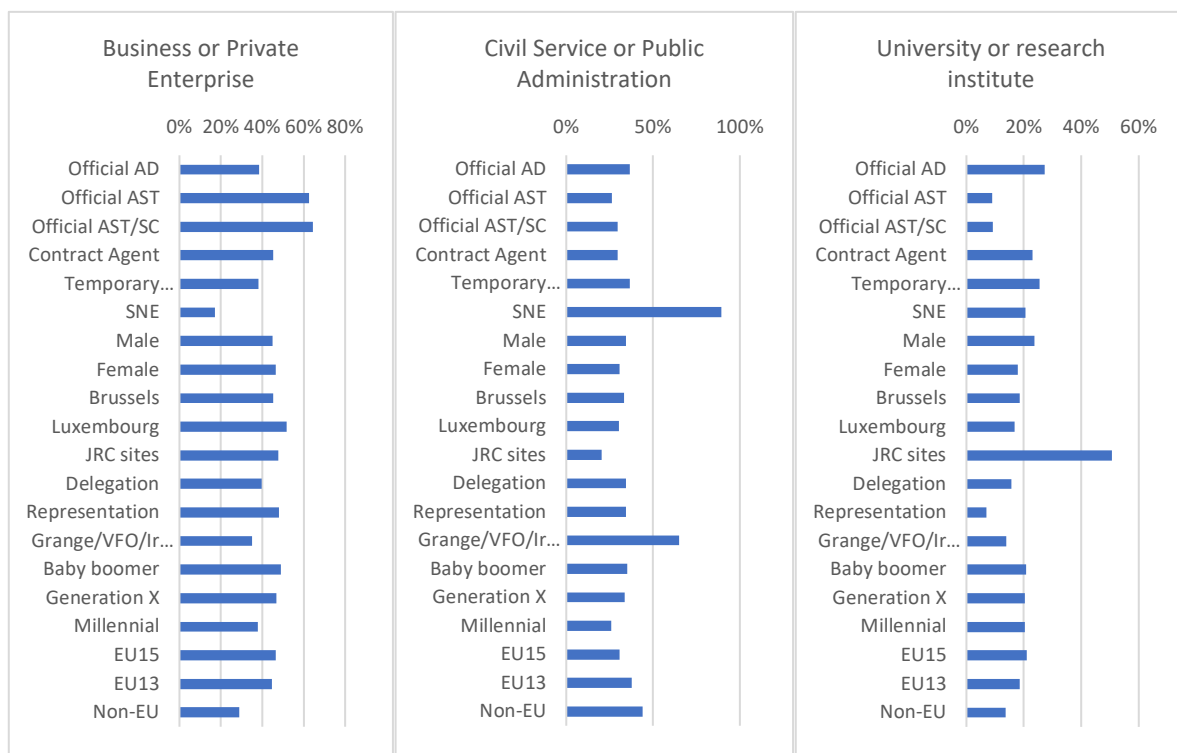
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Analysis of the data on professional experience reveals noteworthy differences (Figure 10). For example, policy officers are much less likely than assistants to come from a

business background and far more likely to have worked in a University or research institute. Staff in Luxembourg are more likely to have a background in the private sector than those

based in Brussels. Staff from the EU13 are more likely than staff from the EU15 to have come from the civil service or public administration.

Figure 10. Background of Commission staff by: contractual status, gender, location, generation and EU15-EU13



Conclusion

Contrary to claims that the Commission is populated overwhelmingly by career bureaucrats or lawyers, neither in fact preponderates among staff. Commission officials come

from a broad range of educational and professional backgrounds, and there is far greater diversity of experience and expertise than accepted wisdoms about the people who work for the organization suggest. As we

noted in 2008, the practice of recruiting officials from a variety of backgrounds that marked the early years of the Commission has proved an enduring feature, which allows the institution to draw on a wide range of talents and specialisms.

Sara Connolly and Hussein Kassim,
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About the project

'The European Commission: Where now? Where next?' is a multinational academic research project, undertaken by a multidisciplinary team. It investigates the internal structure and operation of the Commission, with a particular focus on of the 'political Commission' and the 'new ways of working'. It looks also at the background, beliefs and experience of the people who work for the Commission. The project is informed by data drawn from three sources: responses to an online survey from around 6500 respondents from across and at all levels of the Commission; a programme of more than 200 interviews, including with Commissioners, cabinet members and senior managers; and five focus groups with staff in non-managerial positions. For further information, see our [project website](#)

The project is the third to be undertaken by a team led by Professor Hussein Kassim, following 'The European Commission in Question' in 2008-09 and 'The European Commission: Facing the Future' in 2018. The surveys in 2014 and 2018 were circulated to all staff and the 2008 survey was sent to administrators in policy DGs and members of cabinet. Where we make comparisons across surveys, we attempt to present like-for-like results for all staff in 2014/2018 and for administrators and members of cabinet in 2008/2014/2018.

Funding for the project comes from the European University Institute, the German University of Administrative Sciences Speyer, and the University of East Anglia. Although the European Commission allowed us to undertake the project and offered practical help, they provided no financial support or funding.

To contact us or to subscribe to further research briefings, please email [us](#).

'The European Commission: Where now? Where next?' Research Briefings are edited and produced by Sara Connolly and Hussein Kassim.

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