

# The European Commission

## Where now? Where next?

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### Research Briefing 3: Careers, career-building and mobility in the European Commission

**How do careers work in the Commission? How mobile are Commission staff? When staff move between DGs, are there identifiable patterns?**

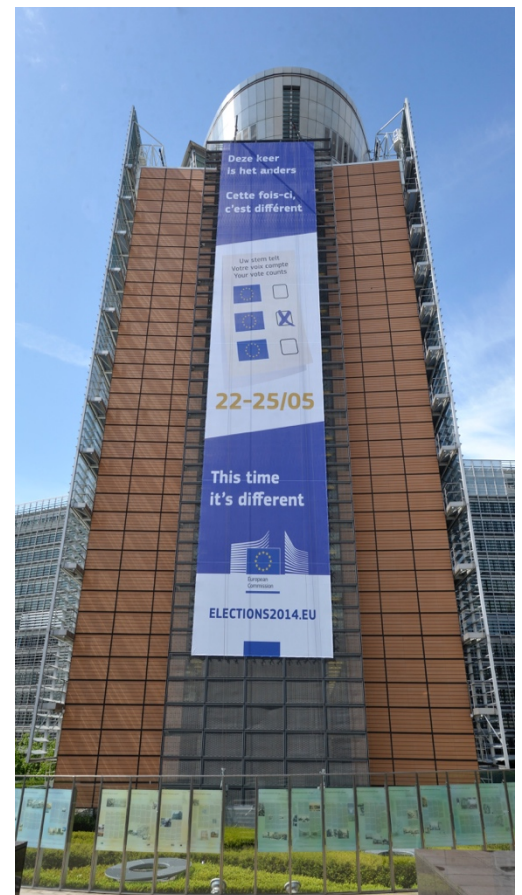
#### Background

Career structure, recruitment practices and promotion procedures are important in any public administration. They influence what kinds of expertise are available at different levels and parts of the organisation, the prospects of career progression and career development, and whether the institution 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, 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 a particular challenge. Although the

Commission administration is a permanent civil service, the requirements of a career-based service sometimes clash with other imperatives, such as the need for expertise and therefore nationals from every member state in all departments and all levels of the service. Conflict is likely to be especially intense when new member countries accede to the European Union.

'The European Commission: Where now? Where next' examines the expectations and recruitment of staff, and their career pathways inside the organization. This briefing looks at three areas: Expectations: What are staff looking for when they apply for a job in the European Commission, and how long do they see themselves working for the organisation? What do they see as the potential downsides? Career building and mobility: How mobile are staff? What evidence is there of career-building? How likely are staff to remain in the same post and the same DG? Career support: do staff know what it takes to advance their careers?



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*Project website:*

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

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# The European Commission Where now? Where next?

## Careers, career-building and mobility

### A career for life?

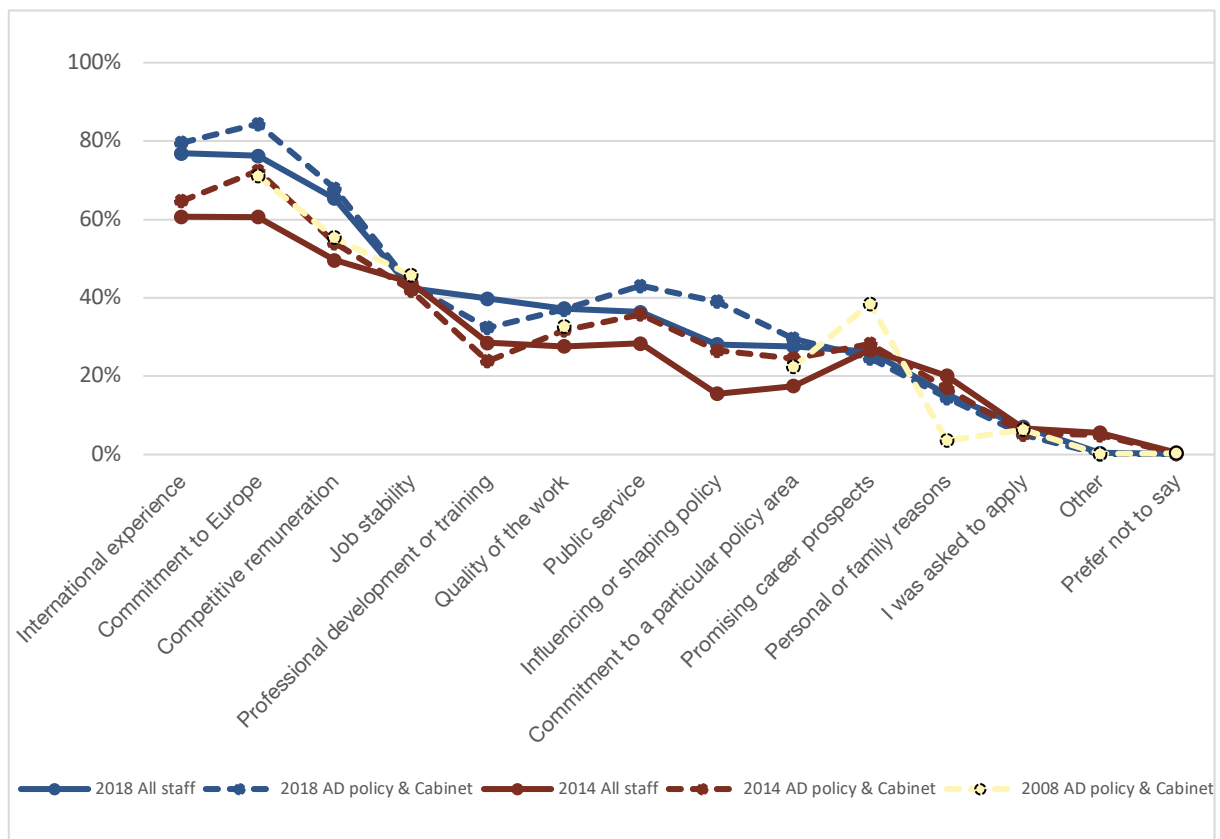
According to the latest conventional wisdom, the world of work is changing. Entrants to the labour market have different expectations of the workplace, are looking for different ways of working, and no longer want a job for life. Public institutions already face fierce competition for well-qualified graduates. In this

challenging climate, the OECD (2017) has identified a 'new fitness for purpose' (OECD 2017) for public institutions.

'The European Commission: Where now? Where next?' approached this issue in three ways. First, the online survey administered as part of the research asked what attracted staff to the institution. Comparing

results over our three studies, conducted in 2008, 2014 and 2018, and shown in Figure 1, we find that 'commitment to Europe', 'international experience' and 'competitive remuneration' are and remain the leading motivations. 'Job stability' has remained relatively constant, while respondents in 2014 and 2018 were less likely to cite 'promising career prospects'

Figure 1. Motivation for joining: 2008, 2014, 2018 compared



**Note:** The study conducted in 2008 surveyed AD officials working in policy DGs and members of Cabinet. For the sake of comparability, we use the same sample for 2014 and 2018. However, for completeness, we also add the responses from all staff across all DGs.

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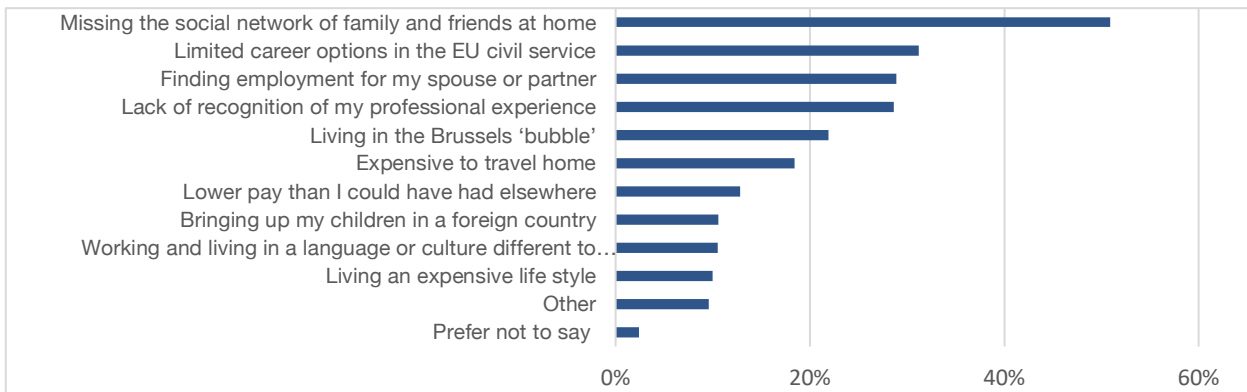
### Careers, career-building and mobility

Second, we sought to discover what factors might deter staff from applying to the Commission. Clearly, there is a sampling issue, since we only posed the question to staff who had taken the decision on balance to pursue a career in the Commission.

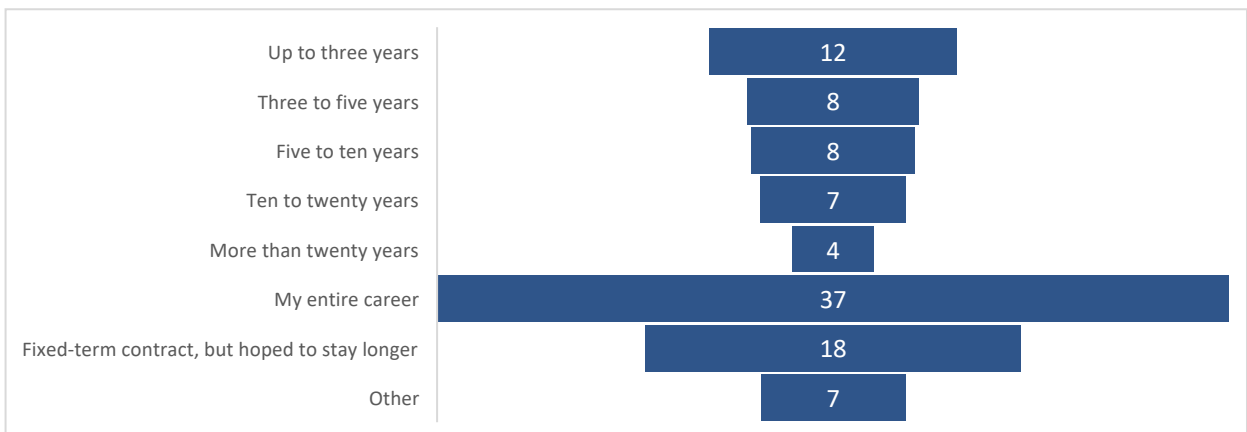
However, the reservations of current employees might give a sense of perceptions among a wider pool of potential candidates. The results are shown in Figure 2. The top reason is 'missing the social network of family and friends', which the Commission can in

practice do little about. However, the same is not true in the case of the second and third reasons -- respectively 'limited career options' and 'finding employment for my spouse or partner'.

**Figure 2. What did you think might be the downsides?**



**Figure 3. When you joined, how long did you think you would work for the Commission?**



Our third question concerned career expectations. In the online survey, we asked staff how long they had expected to work for the Commission when they first applied. The results, which are shown in Figure 3, suggest that the

idea of a job-for-life has not disappeared. Not only do 37 per cent of respondents believe that they would spend their entire career in the Commission, but a further 7 per cent anticipated that they would spend between ten and

twenty years, and another 4 per cent more than twenty years. Only twenty per cent thought that they would work for the institution for less than five years.

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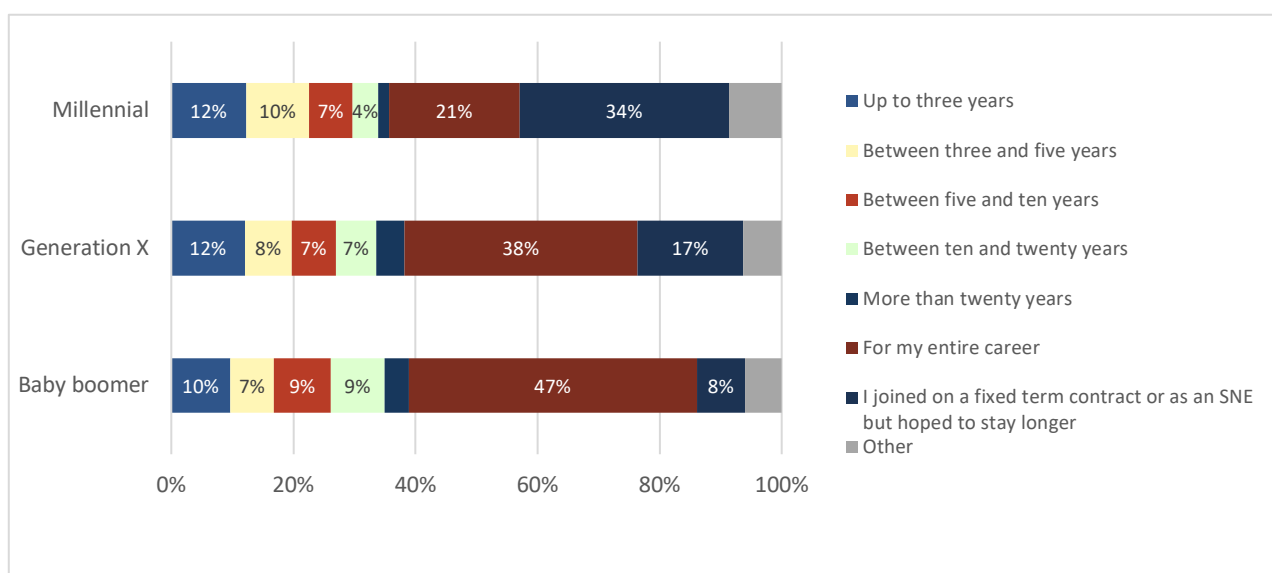
### Careers, career-building and mobility

Given the interest in millennials, we thought it would be useful to breakdown the aggregate numbers by generation. The findings, which are shown in Figure 4, do indeed indicate that a smaller proportion of millennials

(individuals born between 1981 and 1996) than baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) or Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) – 21 per cent versus 47 and 38 per cent respectively intend to spend their entire career in

the Commission, or indeed, more than ten years, but this is mostly a reflection of the fact that they are more likely to have been appointed on fixed term contracts (but hope to stay longer).

**Figure 4. When you entered the Commission, how long did you think you would work for the institution?**



#### Career-building and mobility

Our second area of interest is mobility. We asked staff a series of questions about their professional experience both before and after they joined the Commission.

#### Career-building

As a test of the Commission's career-based system, we sought to discover what proportion of staff had held more than

one position. While 31 per cent replied that their current position is the only position that they had held in the Commission, analysis of the 68 per cent of respondents who indicated that they had worked in more than one role shows strong evidence of career-building amongst staff (Figure 5). Over 80 per cent of officials on AD or AST contracts have worked in more than one position. However, career-building is higher for officials than

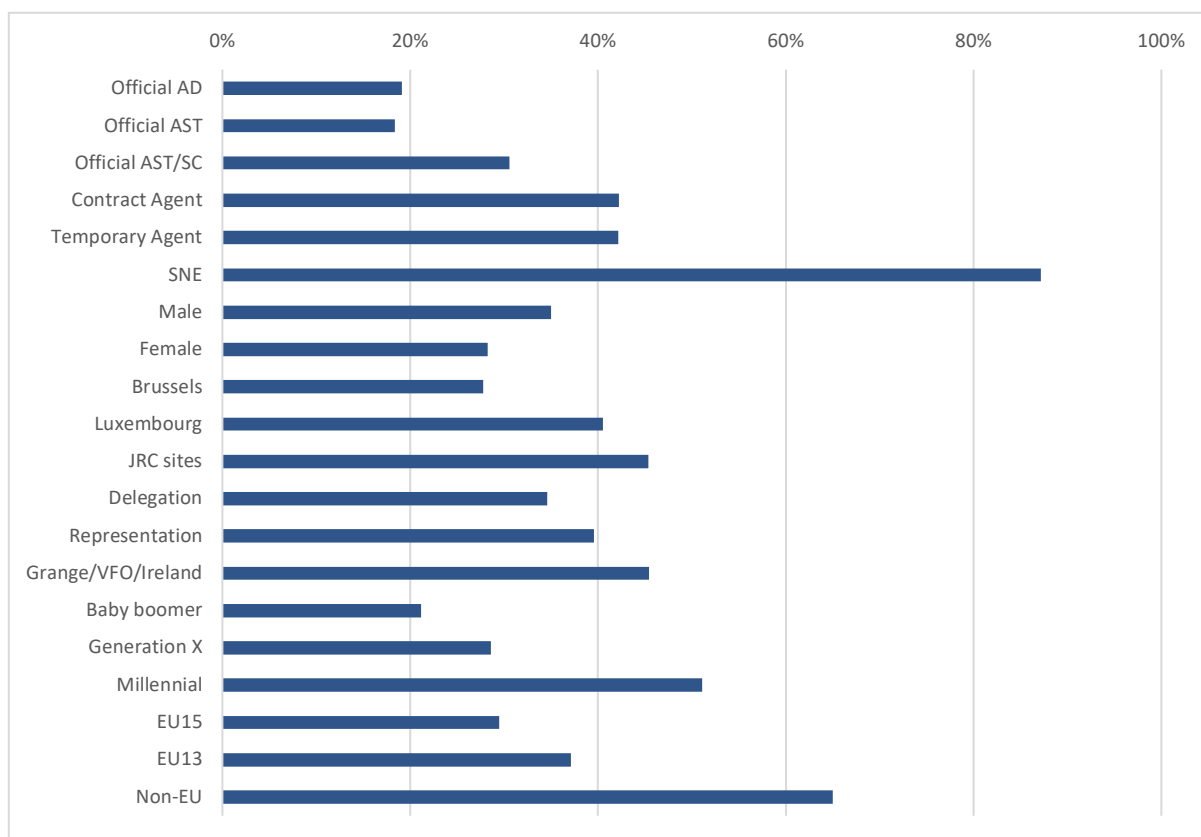
other staff, women more than men, staff working in Brussels rather than Luxembourg or other locations, and staff who are older who have worked longer in the Commission. Only a small minority of managers – 4 per cent of middle managers and 8 per cent of senior managers -- are in their first position, which suggests that, generally, managers do bring experience from other positions in the Commission to their roles.

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### Careers, career-building and mobility

**Figure 5. Current position is the only position held in the Commission by staff type**



#### Horizontal mobility

Public administrations vary considerably in the extent to which mobility between departments is valued, encouraged and supported. Some administrations regard immobility as a virtue, since individuals and the organisation can benefit from specialist knowledge and expertise. Others hold that mobility is important both for personal development and identification with the wider civil service.

In the case of the Commission, as long ago as 1979 the Spierenburg Report identified the lack of

mobility among staff 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 career pathways in the organisation. Fifty-two per

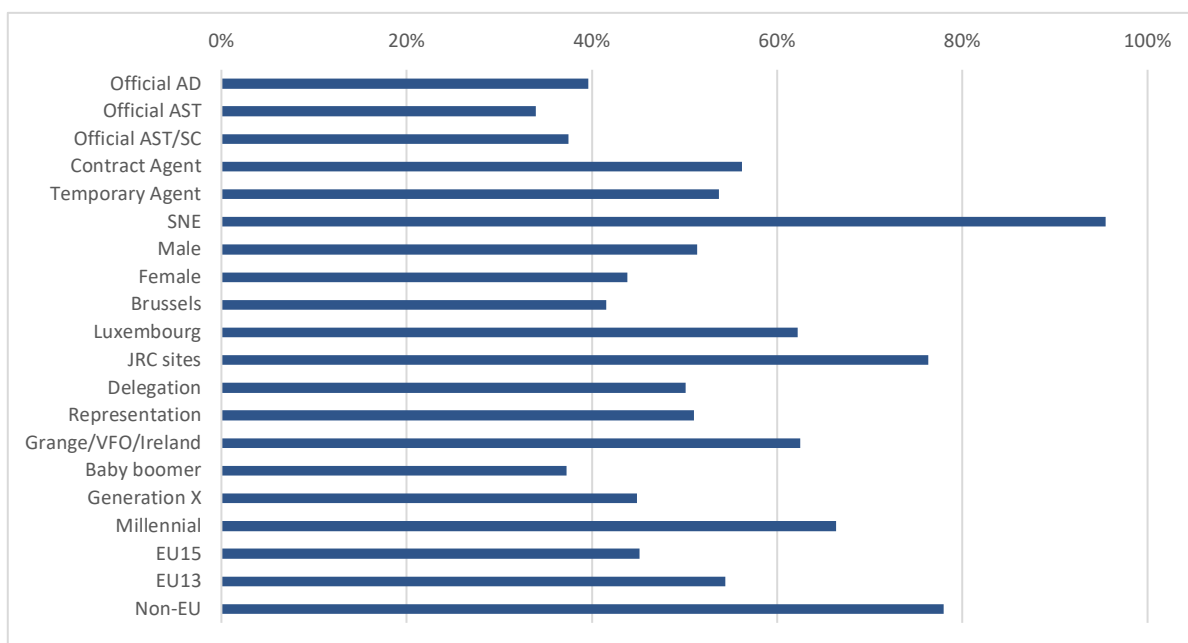
cent of staff have worked in only a single DG. Horizontal mobility is higher for officials than other staff categories, women, staff working in Brussels and staff who are older who have worked longer in the Commission (Figure 6). Meanwhile, around a quarter of managers, 27 per cent of middle managers and 20 per cent of senior managers, have experience of working in a single DG. Levels of horizontal mobility also vary between DGs. Perhaps reflecting professional specialisms, close to 80 per cent of staff working in DGT, JRC and SCIC have worked only in that DG (Figure 7).

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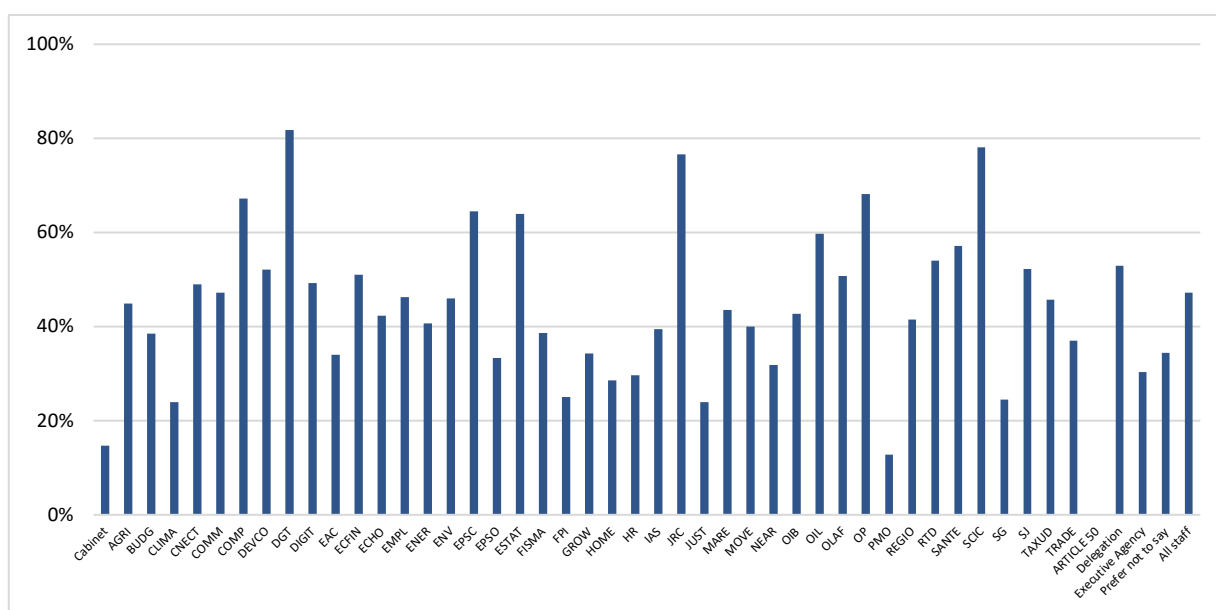
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### Careers, career-building and mobility

**Figure 6. Current position is the only position held in the Commission by staff type**



**Figure 7. Current position is the only position held in the Commission, by DG**



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## Where now? Where next?

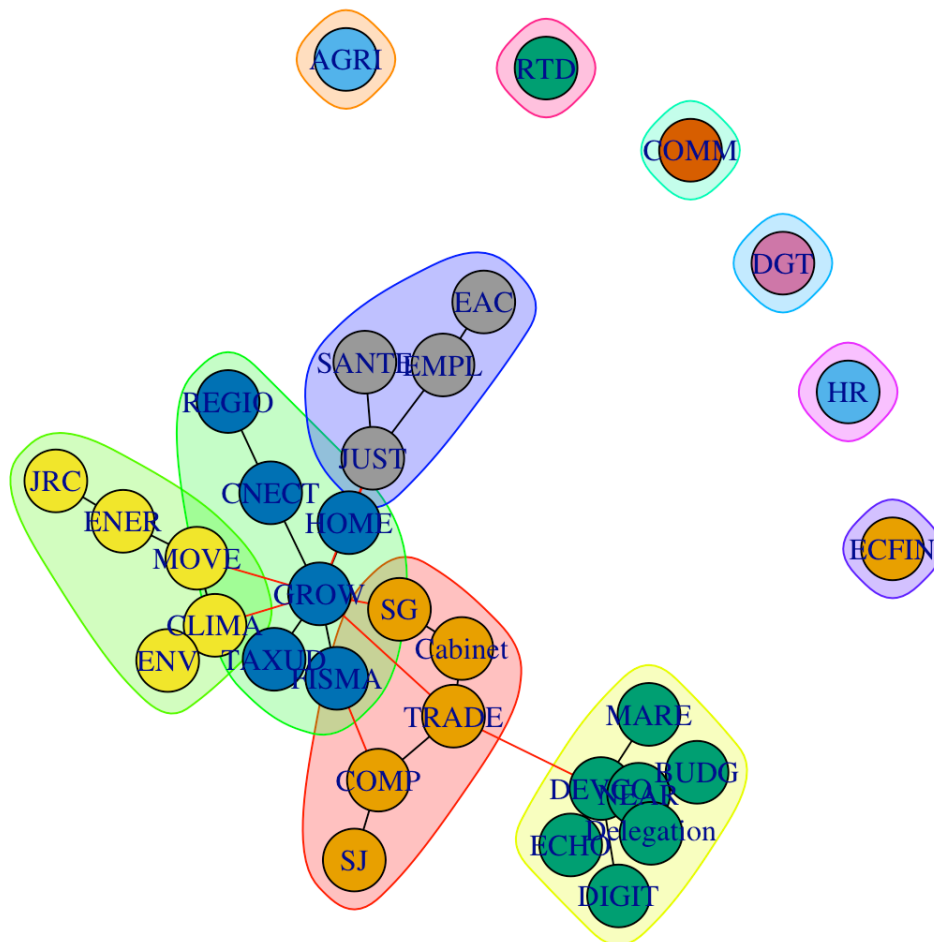
### Careers, career-building and mobility

Where there is mobility between departments, we wondered if there was any of evidence of specific patterns -- in other words, whether

staff tend to move within families of DGs. In the online survey, we had asked respondents to list the DGs in which they had previously worked. Using a

cluster analysis, we attempted to identify patterns in the groups of DGs that staff report having worked in.<sup>1</sup> The results are shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Families of DGs



<sup>1</sup> There were two limitations. First, where DGs have changed names, merged or

been divided up, we treated the entities concerned as if they were a single DG and employed the names of

services as they were in 2018. Second, due to low response rates some smaller DGs were not included in the analysis.

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### Careers, career-building and mobility

Five main families where the employment histories of staff are strongly interconnected emerge from the analysis. They are:

- *Scientific DGs* (CLIMA, ENV, ENER, JRC, MOVE) these DGs have commonalities in their portfolios and in the educational background of their staffs, they are the closest to the natural sciences.
- *International or extra-EU DGs* (Delegation, DEVCO, ECHO, MARE, NEAR) with the addition BUDG and DIGIT.
- *Social DGs* (EAC, EMPL, JUST, SANTE – highlighted in lilac) form a family of DGs.
- *Central DGs* (Cabinet, COMP, SG, SJ, TRADE) form a family of perhaps the most powerful, but also independent DGs.
- *Internal market DGs* (CNECT, FISMA, GROW, HOME, REGIO, TAXUD) form a family, around GROW.

The remaining DGs are – in our database, at least – DGs with the biggest share of staff that have either worked in only one DG and/or with no strong employment history link with other DGs.

#### Career expectations and support

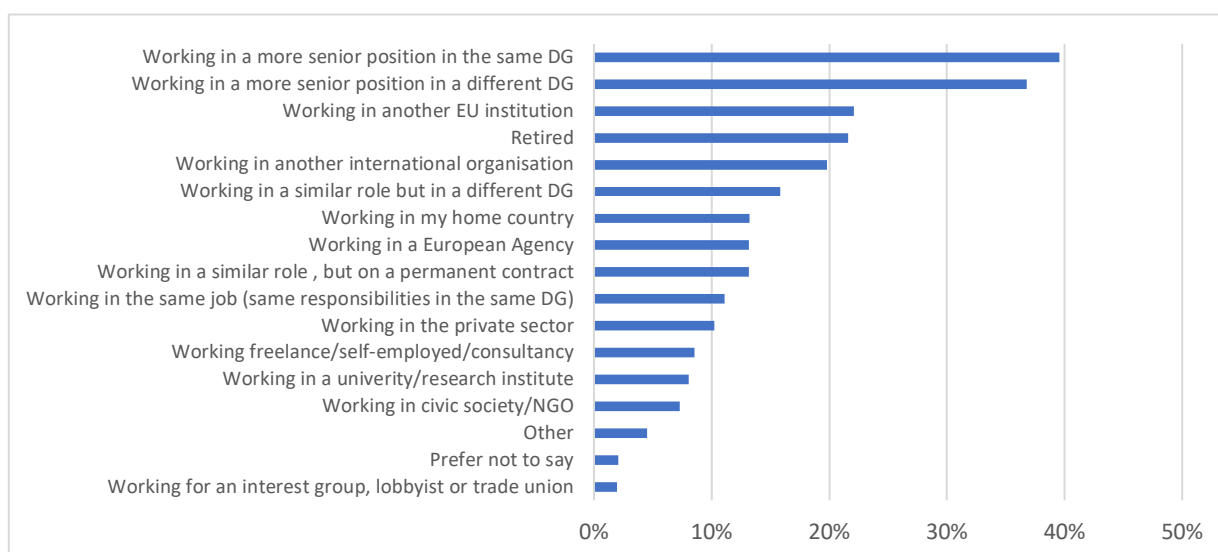
As the Commission is a permanent civil service, we wondered about the ambitions that staff nurtured for their career development. In the online survey, we asked staff to tell us where they would like

to be in ten years' time (Figure 9).

Relatively few respondents (11 per cent) indicated that they would like to be working in the same job in the same DG. More than a third of staff, however, wanted to be working in a more senior position either

in the same department or another DG. Just over a fifth expected to be retired. A similar number would like to work in another EU institution. Just under a fifth would like to be employed in another international organisation.

**Figure 9. Where would you like to be in ten years' time?**





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### Careers, career-building and mobility

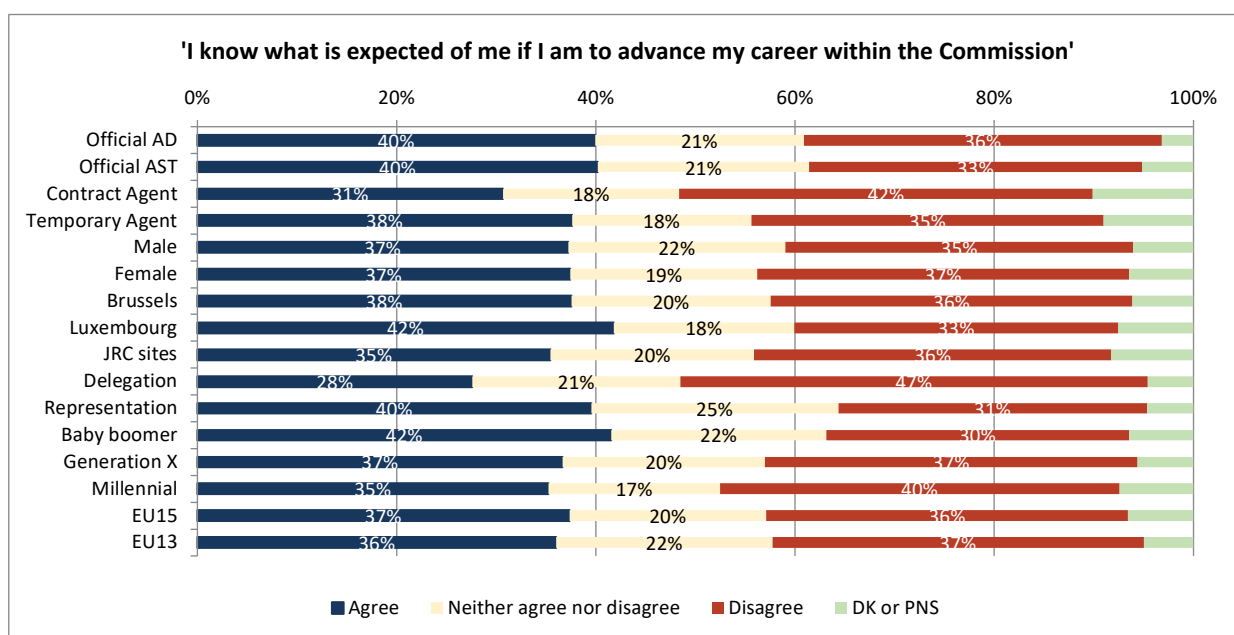
#### Career support

Also, in a career civil service, it is important that staff know what is expected of them, how to advance their career, and where they might seek advice. We asked a series of questions about expectations and support in the online survey.

Our results show that half of our respondents agree that horizontal mobility is advantageous in terms of career development, while just under 40 per cent of staff report they know what is expected of them in terms of progressing their career within the Commission. However, a similar number disagree (36 per cent).

Officials, staff working in Luxembourg and those who are older with longer careers in the Commission are more confident that they know what is expected of them in terms of advancing their careers. There are no gender differences, and more than half of managers agree with this statement (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. Career development. Breakdown by contractual status, location, gender, generation, and EU15/EU13



(Note: DK or PNS = Don't know or Prefer not to say)

When asked whether working for several DGs is advantageous for advancement, AD officials, women, staff working in Representation, millennials and staff from EU13 are also more likely to agree that horizontal mobility is an important dimension to career progression. Managers – especially

senior managers – are even more likely to agree with. However, fewer than a quarter agree and almost 50 per cent disagree that they are able to access the right opportunities in order to advance their careers. Officials are much more likely than those on short-terms contracts (Contract or Temporary Agents) to

agree that they are able to access the right career development opportunities (Figure 11). Staff working in Delegations are less likely to agree and staff in Luxembourg are more likely to agree with this statement. We observe no gender differences. Again, we find that managers are more likely to agree.

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### Careers, career-building and mobility

Figure 11. Accessing career development opportunities. Breakdown by contractual status, location, gender, generation, and EU15/EU13

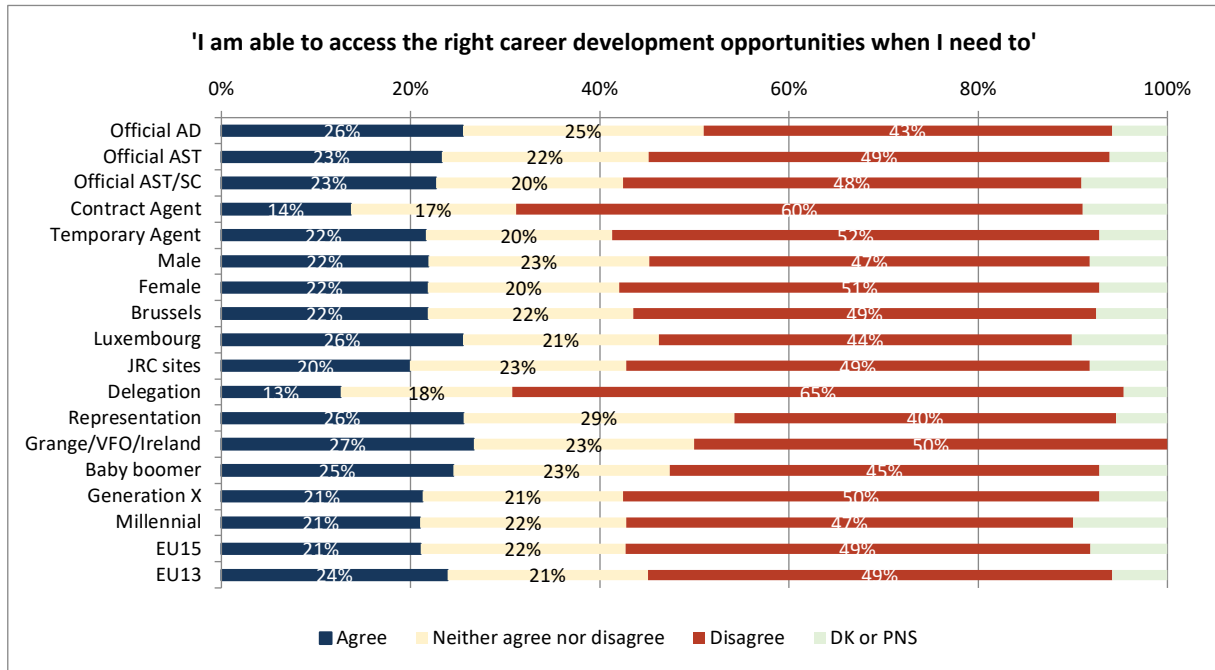
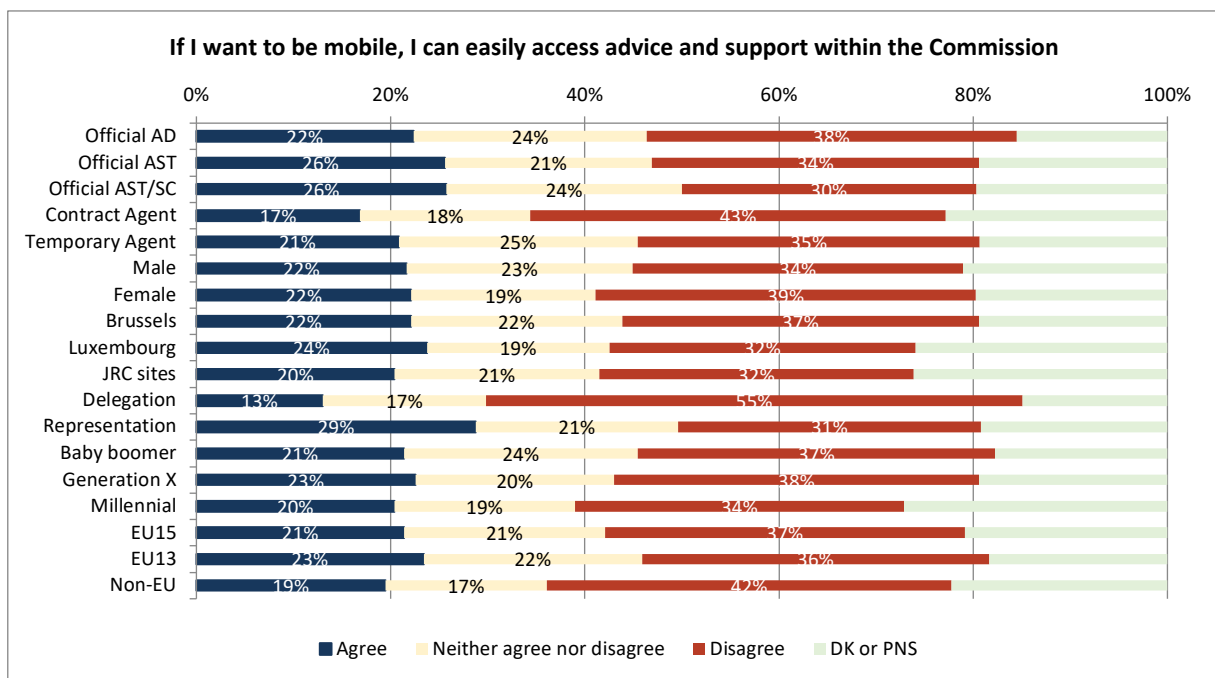


Figure 12. Accessing advice and support for mobility. Breakdown by contractual status, location, gender, generation, and EU15/EU13



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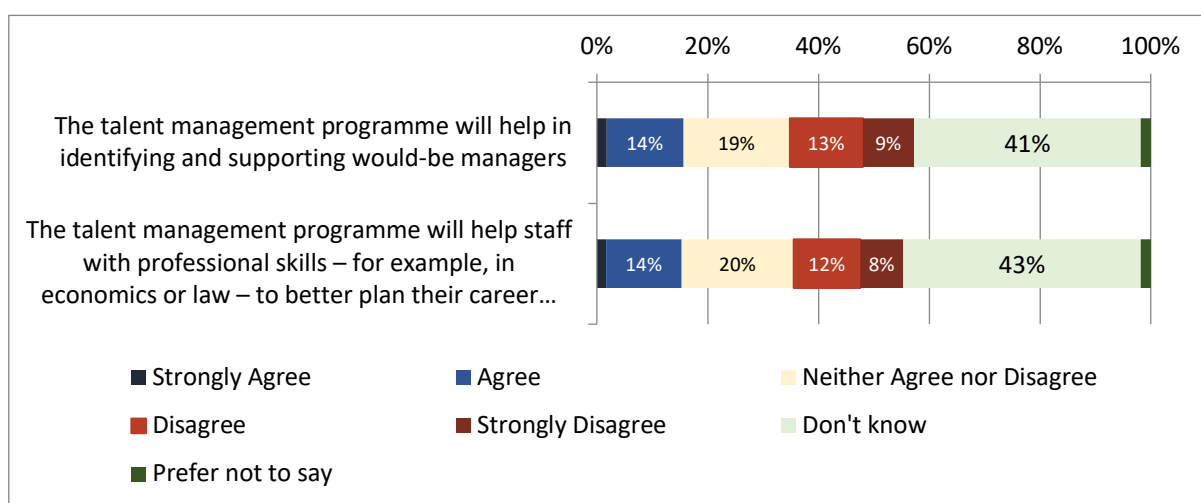
### Careers, career-building and mobility

Similarly, a significant proportion of staff either disagree that they can access relevant advice and support if they want to be mobile, or do not know (see Figure 12). Women are

more likely than men to disagree with the statement. Managers are only slightly more likely to agree. The Commission is aware of many of these issues and has sought to

address the issue with a talent management programme. However, as Figure 13 shows, awareness of the initiative is as yet not widespread.

**Figure 13. The talent management programme**



#### Conclusion

Commission staff are more likely to cite 'international experience' or 'commitment to Europe' than any other motivation for pursuing a career in the organisation. Despite changes in the labour market, a large number are still looking to spend all or a significant part of their career working

for the Commission – although there are sharp differences between generations.

Inside the Commission, the picture for mobility is mixed. A significant segment of staff tend to remain the same position and/or the same DG, perhaps for reasons of professional specialism or training. However, officials

are more mobile. Moreover, there is evidence that officials circulate among specific families of DGs.

A high proportion of staff see their future in the Commission. However, many are unsure what career advancement requires and those that do know are not sure how to access advice or opportunities.

*Sara Connolly, Hussein Kassim, and Pierre Alayrac*  
28 November 2019

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### Careers, career-building and mobility

#### 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](#)

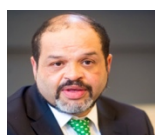
The project is the third to be undertaken by a team led by Professor Hussein Kassim, following '[The European Commission in Question](#)' in 2008-09 and '[The European Commission: Facing the Future](#)' in 2018. The surveys in 2014 and 2018 were circulated to all staff and the 2008 survey was sent to 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](mailto:us).

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

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