

Institution: University of East Anglia		
Unit of Assessment: 19 – Politics and International Studies		
Title of case study: Improving practice in EU political leadership and administration		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2008 – 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Hussein Kassim	Professor of Politics	2007 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 – 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact <p>The European Union (EU) is a highly complex system of governance. Twenty-seven member states, and the EU institutions, share authority and make decisions affecting the lives of 446 million citizens. The EU's work is supported by a permanent, multinational civil service, located mainly in Brussels and Luxembourg and spread across several institutions. The European Commission, with 33,000 staff led by the Commission President, develops, delivers, and enforces policy. The European Council and the Council of the European Union, which have EU-wide executive and legislative responsibilities, are supported by the General Secretariat of the Council (the "GSC" or the "Council Secretariat"), with a staff of 3,000 headed by a Secretary General. Given the complexity of the EU administration, the mix of nationalities, and the political sensitivity associated with its organisation, structure, and operation, change is difficult and cannot be achieved without a clearly argued and well evidenced rationale.</p> <p>Research undertaken by Kassim's team on the organisation and operation of the EU administration, using theories, models, and methods from political science and public administration, has inspired and informed significant change in both the Commission and the Council Secretariat. The team's analyses, based on original and detailed data they collected, have enhanced the self-understanding of those working in the key administrative structures and their understanding of specific practices in the two bodies. The research findings thus helped to bring about important cultural change in the Council Secretariat. They guided President Juncker's 2014 restructuring of the Commission, informed the Council Secretariat's 2016 modernisation programme, and led to a re-writing of professional standards and codes of practice in the Council Secretariat. In the words of one official to the team: <i>"You deserve recognition for the excellent work done. Your study was a game changer in the GSC"</i> [S1].</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>Across four projects conducted over twelve years, Kassim and his collaborators have undertaken pioneering research that draws extensively on insider perspectives from the Commission and the Council Secretariat to investigate and deliver new and original findings on leadership, vertical and horizontal coordination, and management policies, practices, and culture. The projects are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The European Commission in Question (2008-09) funded by the ESRC (G1) and involving partners from Edinburgh, Konstanz, Sciences Po Paris, and UNC-Chapel Hill, as well as another unit at UEA. A survey of policy-related staff (1901 responses), supplemented by 209 interviews, made possible a critical examination of the new model of presidential leadership introduced by Barroso in 2004, the transformation of the Secretariat General into a personal service of the President, and the impact on vertical and horizontal coordination in the Commission (R1 and R6). • The European Commission: Facing the Future (2014) funded by a private research grant (G2) involved partners from Edinburgh, Humboldt, and Sciences Po Paris, as well as another unit at UEA. The collection of data from a survey of staff from all contract groups (5545 responses), supplemented by 245 interviews and 5 focus groups, enabled the team to analyse working practices across and at all levels of the organisation, compare the two Barroso Presidencies (2004-09, 2010-14), and track the evolution of presidential leadership and its impact on policy coordination and effectiveness (R2, R5 and R6). 		

- **Understanding the EU Civil Service: The General Secretariat of the Council (2016)** included partners from the European University Institute, Edinburgh, Sciences Po Paris (G3), and Speyer, as well as another unit at UEA. It generated and analysed data from 1356 survey responses from staff at all grades and levels, 117 interviews, and 5 focus groups enabling investigation into the backgrounds, workplace experiences, beliefs and values of staff in the Secretariat, and comparison with Commission staff (R2 and R6).
- **The European Commission: Where now? Where next? (2018)** was funded in part by the UEA ESRC IAA and involved partners from the EUI, Edinburgh, and Speyer, as well as another unit at UEA and Bocquillon, an early career researcher from the submitting unit. It collected and examined data from 6500 survey responses from staff at all grades and levels, 210 interviews, and 5 focus groups. The research provided a detailed assessment of organisational and procedural changes introduced by the Juncker Commission, enabling comparison and critical evaluation of different leadership models. As the third wave of data collection, the study made it possible to investigate changes in organisation, management and staff attitudes (R5).

The research made a distinct contribution to EU scholarship in four ways:

- **Focus:** much of the literature on the EU is preoccupied with the relative influence of EU institutions in policy making. Kassim and his team broke new ground in their application of theoretical approaches, models, and concepts from political science, public administration, and political sociology to investigate, track, and explain the operation and evolution of organisational structures and processes in the EU administration, and the mobility, career-building, socialisation, and attitudes of EU civil servants.
- **Scope:** while previous studies of the Commission looked at particular groups or structures, or specific departments, these projects examined dynamics across the whole organisation. The three repeat studies of the Commission made it possible to undertake longitudinal analysis of organisational change, and staff beliefs, attitudes, and values, as well as the interaction between the two.
- **Access:** the team were the first external researchers to be granted full access to the staff of the European Commission and the Council Secretariat.
- **Data and method:** the research involved generating new data from large-n surveys, interviews, and focus-groups, making it possible to combine quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Publications from these projects present original findings, analyses, and evaluations of:

- the sources and processes driving presidentialisation, the benefits and “perils” of presidentialism, and the impact of different styles of presidentialism on policy activism and inter-institutional relations;
- the operation of the College and the role conception of Commissioners under different models of presidential leadership, the impact of different models on interaction between the political level (the College of Commissioners and their private offices – the “cabinets”), the Secretariat General, and interdepartmental coordination;
- staff assessments of models of Commission leadership since 2004, including the impact on the operation of the College, the sources of presidential legitimacy, and in the case of the Juncker Commission, the Spitzenkandidaten process and explicit pre-appointment policy prioritisation;
- staff attitudes to organisational change in the Commission and the Council Secretariat, and how in the Commission changes in organisational structure affect staff motivation and engagement;
- staff attitudes to management, personnel, and performance assessment systems and practices in the Commission and the Council Secretariat and the variables that explain them.

3. References to the research

R1. The European Commission of the Twenty-First Century

Kassim, H., Peterson, J., Connolly, S., Dehousse, R., Hooghe L., and Thompson A.

Oxford University Press, 2013, ISBN: 9780199599523

R2. The European Commission: Facing the Future

Connolly, S., and Kassim, H.

Report, 2015 (Held on file at UEA)

R3. Understanding the EU Civil Service: The General Secretariat of the Council

Connolly, S., Kassim, H., and Vantaggiato, F.

Final report, 2017, (the “Kassim report” [sic]) unpublished confidential report presented to the Secretary General of the Council and members of his office, published internally and presented by Connolly and Kassim to staff at an open meeting of the Council Secretariat. (Held on file at UEA).

R4. Managing the house: The Presidency, agenda control and policy activism in the European Commission

Kassim, H., Connolly, S., Dehousse, R., Rozenberg, O., and Benjaballah, S.

Journal of European Public Policy, 2016, 24(5), 653-674.

DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2016.1154590

R5. The Juncker Presidency: The “Political Commission” in Practice

Kassim, H. and Laffan, B.

Journal of Common Market Studies, 2019, 57(S1), 49– 61. DOI: 10.1111/jcms.12941.

R6. Breaking out of silos: explaining cross-departmental interactions in two European bureaucracies.

Vantaggiato, F.P., **Kassim, H. and Connolly, S.**

Journal of European Public Policy, 2020, DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2020.1784253

Grant information

G1. **Project: The European Commission in Question.** (PI) Kassim, H.

Funder: ESRC Research Grant. Amount: GBP209,656. Dates: 2007-10.

G2. **Project: European Commission: Facing the Future.** (PIs) Connolly, S., Kassim, H

Funder: Private donation. Amount: GBP58,738. Dates: 2013-14.

G3. **Project: Understanding the EU Civil Service.** (PIs) Connolly, S., Kassim, H

Funder: Science Po Paris. Amount: GBP12,785. Dates: 2016-19

4. Details of the impact

The research has had considerable impact, firstly, because of its quality and relevance to senior officeholders, and, secondly, because team members had a track record in the Commission given their previous work and the demonstrated value of the 2008-09 project to the organisation. At a time of internal change, the then Secretary General, with the endorsement of Commission President Barroso, authorised the research and used the findings to inform reflections concerning the future development of the administration.

The team thus earned the recognition and credibility that made possible the subsequent Commission projects and opened the door to the Council Secretariat. While maintaining its academic independence, the team worked closely with top officeholders, listening and responding to their needs and interests, and presenting early results, before disseminating overall findings to wider audiences inside the respective parts of the administration.

This relationship was a key pathway to impact, as it created opportunities to communicate findings and hold exchanges on the research. For instance, in 2018-19, at the invitation of top leaders, Kassim and Connolly made twenty-two invited presentations to audiences including: the Commissioner for Administration and his private office [S1]; the weekly meeting of heads of the private offices of the Commissioners; the Secretary General; the Director General of the HR department; top managers in the Secretariat General and in other departments; the Directors' General awayday; the lunchtime seminar open to all staff. Their work was reported on in the staff magazine and the staff intranet carried findings from the project and circulated the link to research briefings on the project website. At the request of the then Secretary General, the team prepared a series of special briefings for President-elect, which were among the materials communicated to her following her nomination. In the Council Secretariat, Kassim and Connolly made presentations to the Secretary General and members of his private office. The “Kassim report” (R3) was circulated to all staff, and they made a presentation of the

findings to a meeting open to all staff. Through these means the research has had three main impacts.

1. Restructuring of the European Commission, 2014. Analyses of political leadership in the Commission, especially the power of the Commission Presidency, the working of the College, and relations between the College and the Commission departments under the two Barroso Commissions, influenced the historic reform of the College enacted by President of the European Commission, Juncker, where seven Vice Presidents were given leading roles in upstream coordination. The remodelling was designed to ensure early political policy coordination, strengthen political leadership over the administration, and thereby ensure the effective delivery of the President's programme. Research briefings and slides reporting findings from the 2014 project (outputs R1 and R2) were used by President [REDACTED]

President [REDACTED] recalls [S2]: *"As I prepared to take office, among the compulsory reading suggested to me by the Secretary-General of the Commission and my Head of Cabinet at the time, were policy briefings on the European Commission prepared on the basis of the first two research projects [(R1) and (R2)] ... I found their work on leadership and coordination within the Institution particularly useful in my reflections on how to organise and focus the work of the next College of Commissioners".* [S4] commented similarly: *"I found Professor Kassim's work on leadership and coordination within the institution particularly useful in my reflections on how to advise President Juncker to organise and focus the work on the College of Commissioners. His research provided both some of the justifications and the guidance needed for the (re-)structuring of the Commission by President Juncker in 2014".*

2. Modernising the Council Secretariat, 2016-20. The research also informed the reform programme initiated by the Secretary General, [REDACTED]. In its analysis of the *"understanding of staff's own perceptions of the organisation"* [S3], the "Kassim report" (R3) played an important part in setting the context for the measures [S4, S3]. In presentations outlining the reform, the Secretary General cited data from the report [R3] as evidence of where action was necessary and was the direction of travel supported by staff. It showed that as well as strongly favouring modernisation, staff in general particularly supported measures to improve coordination and information flows, delay the hierarchy, and reform personnel policy [S3], *"to empower staff more, to use participatory leadership techniques ... [T]he study also identified the lack of a common management culture which we have been working to improve since the study"* [S3].

The research specifically led to a reform of the staff appraisal system, and a review of competencies and skill for each main staff group that led to new guidance for managers. As the Head of Staff Development notes [S5]: *"The Kassim Connolly study formed the basis of my team's work to support the review of management role descriptors, staff role descriptors, as well as to work on promoting a common management culture, a new policy on staff development and clearer communication on career paths"*. It also led to changes in the Council Secretariat's Translation Service (LING). *"Following the insights generated by this research ... LING [management] has introduced certain measures to overcome the shortcomings identified by staff by providing opportunities for staff to break silos and reduce LING's isolation (1), to accommodate the need for more and better communication (2) and to provide enhanced mobility options (3)"* [S6].

Even more significantly, the research initiated a cultural change within the Council Secretariat [S7], historically a secretive and inward-looking organisation, keen to remain in the background. As well as playing a direct part in making the organisation more outward looking, the research highlighted the value of listening to the views of staff: *"[I]t helped build trust ... [And] staff became much more aware of the issues that faced them and the fact that they could influence them"* [S7]. The study led to the introduction of an annual staff survey. The presentation in January 2017 by Kassim and Connolly to a meeting of all staff, attended by 300 and watched by a further 500 via video streaming, was considered key in developing organisational trust: *"The openness of the exercise, with the study team presenting their findings in a clear and extensive written report and in an open meeting with staff was an important success factor"* [S3].

3. Briefing the von der Leyen European Commission, 2019-20. Findings from the 2018 project [R4, R5, R6] influenced the von der Leyen Commission in two ways. First, as the Juncker

Commission approached the end of its term in 2019, the team presented analyses of the organisational and procedural changes introduced in 2014 and conclusions concerning possible options for the incoming Commission to the Secretary General, Directors General, the heads of the Commissioners' private offices, and the European Political Strategy Centre. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]: *"I have included Professor Kassim's work in the briefing materials delivered to Ms von der Leyen"* [S8]. Outgoing Commission [REDACTED] [S2] confirmed that: *"As was done for me, I will recommend the briefs from this new project [The European Commission: Where now? Where next?] as compulsory reading to my successor. They offer unique insights on the internal organisation of the Commission and its evolution over time – an indispensable asset when deciding how best to prepare the Institution for the challenges ahead"*.

Second, research on management and personnel policy over three Commissions has informed the new HR strategy initiated by the von der Leyen Commission in 2020 [R1, R2, R4, R6]. Following the announcement by the new Commissioner and Director General for Human Resources of a major consultation exercise to inform HR reforms, Kassim and Connolly were invited to deliver three two-hour Masterclasses to members of Cabinet, HR leadership and managers on: staff recruitment and career pathways; the Commission as a workforce; organisational change [R1, 2, 4, 5 & 6]. The Masterclasses, which were delivered virtually in October and November 2020 and attended by more than 700 people, presented findings and analysis from all three projects. Thanking us *"for the three excellent sessions"*, Principal Adviser for HR Professionalisation in the HR department noted that: *"These events were very well attended, very much appreciated, and extremely useful in terms of reminding staff of the history and progress on people issues in the Commission. Also very useful for our Cabinet colleagues in getting up to speed on these issues. And very useful for me in our work on the HR Strategy, particularly in terms of the consistency of messages across our own surveys, external benchmarks, and your research"* [S9].

In summary, the research has generated significant and far-reaching impact in the European Commission and the Council Secretariat, informing changes in the structure and practices in organisations that affect the working lives of respectively 33,000 and 3,000 EU civil servants, who serve 460 million EU citizens. As well as underlying how it has influenced actions and decision making, the testimonials show the respect for the calibre and quality of the research. They recognise that external researchers can pose questions to staff and investigate issues that management cannot. Moreover, because the research draws extensively on the insights and experience of insiders, the findings have an authority and authenticity that senior officeholders value. In the words of a former Commission President: *"[t]he insights they provide in their work is unrivalled. Even the most well-informed European think-tanks and top academic literature cannot match the team's depth of understanding about the Commission"* [S2]. In the Commission, the longitudinal analysis of the evolution of organisations, procedures, personnel policy, and staff attitudes is considered especially helpful.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1. Testimonial from Commissioner for Budget and Administration, 2017-19. 29.11.2019.
- S2. Testimonial from President of the European Commission, 2014-19, 12.07.2019.
- S3. Testimonial and email from Director General, General Council of the Secretariat, 18.02.2020.
- S4. Testimonial from the Secretary General of the General Council of the Secretariat, 07.02.2020.
- S5. Testimonial and email from Head of the Staff Development Unit, General Secretariat of the Council. 05.10.2020.
- S6. Testimonial from the Head of Unit, and from the Director of Translation Services (LING), General Council of the Secretariat. 14.05.2020.
- S7. Testimonial from member of the private office of the Secretary General of the General Council of the Secretariat. 07.02.2020.
- S8. Testimonial from the former head of the private office of the President of the European Commission (2014-18) and Secretary General of the European Commission (2018-19) 31.07.2019.
- S9. Testimonial and email from the Principal Adviser, Professionalisation and Orientation, Directorate General Human Resources and Security, European Commission. 24.02.2021.