

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| Institution: University of East Anglia | | |
| Unit of Assessment: 17 - Business and Management Studies | | |
| Title of case study: Modernising organisational structures and HR practices in the EU administrations | | |
| Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2008 - 2020 | | |
| Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit: | | |
| Name(s): Sara Connolly | Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of Personnel Economics | Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 1993 – to 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 complex system of governance, in which 27 member states share decisional authority with each other and the EU institutions. The EU's work is supported by a permanent, multinational civil service, mostly located in Brussels and Luxembourg. The two key bodies are the European Commission (with 33,000 staff), and the European Council and the Council of the European Union (the Council Secretariat or GSC, with 3,000 staff). Both have staff with a mix of nationality, cultural norms and working practices, and a tradition of strong union power. Any proposed improvement in organisational structure, operation or development can only be made if the case and process for such change is well researched, clearly articulated, and enjoys the confidence of senior management. UEA research led by Professor Connolly and Professor Kassim (submitted in UoA19) on the organisation and operation of the EU administration dating back to 2008, has inspired and informed changes in organisational culture and practice in both sets of bodies. Their analyses, have increased general self-understanding of key structures, processes and practices in the two bodies, and helped bring about a cultural change in the Council Secretariat. The research 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.</p> | | |
| 2. Underpinning research <p>Professors Connolly and Kassim have a long track-record of research in Public Administration. Since 2008, across four projects, they have produced analyses of the EU administration, based on data collected from large-n surveys, interviews and focus-groups conducted in the Commission and the Council Secretariat. The research made a distinct contribution to EU scholarship in four ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Focus: whereas much of the literature on the EU is preoccupied with the relative influence of EU institutions in policy making, the UEA 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 possible a mixed quantitative and qualitative analysis <p>This body of work was recognised at a senior level in the two key bodies of the EU as the necessary underpinnings for much needed organisational change. The projects are:</p> <p>The European Commission in Question (2008-9) funded by the ESRC (G1), involved partners from Edinburgh, Konstanz, Sciences Po Paris and UNC-Chapel Hill. The project</p> | | |

reported on a survey of policy-related staff (1,901 responses), supplemented by 209 interviews. The research provided 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, R5, R6)

The European Commission: Facing the Future (2014) funded by a private research grant (G2) involved partners from Edinburgh, Humboldt, and Sciences Po Paris. The collection of data from a survey of staff from all contract groups (5,545 responses), supplemented by 245 interviews and 5 focus groups, enabled the team to analyse working practices across and at all levels of the organisation. The research allowed a comparison of the two Barroso Presidencies (2004-09, 2010-14), and track the evolution of presidential leadership and its impact on policy coordination and effectiveness. (R2, R4, R5, R6)

Understanding the EU Civil Service: the General Secretariat of the Council (2016) included partners from Edinburgh, the European University Institute, Speyer and Sciences Po Paris (G3). It generated and analysed data from 1,356 survey responses from staff at all grades and levels, 117 interviews, and 5 focus groups. The research provided an analysis of the backgrounds, workplace experiences, beliefs and values of staff in the Secretariat, and a comparison with Commission staff. (R3)

The European Commission: Where now? Where next? (2018), funded in part by the UEA ESRC IAA and the EUI, also involved partners from Edinburgh and Speyer. It collected and examined data from 6,500 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.

This programme of research has studied the experience of working in the EU civil service with a particular focus on leadership, organisational structure, management and HR practices. They:

- evaluated the process and impact of presidentialisation on the internal operation of the Commission as an organisation, which enabled the team to identify benefits (greater focus, streamlining and emphasis on delivery) and perils (buy-in, accountability) of presidentialism;
- showed how the effectiveness of interdepartmental coordination in the Commission depends on the concentration of resource at the political and administrative centres of the organisation;
- examined the impact of EU enlargement on values, culture and gender equality, finding that the key experiences and values are similar despite perceptions of difference, and that enlargement contributed to a feminisation of the workforce but did not break the glass ceiling;
- explored staff experience of the Council Secretariat and its administrative culture highlighting the Secretariat's segmented character, and examined the consequences for both individual employees and the organisation. It assessed the effectiveness of hierarchy and other inherited structures and policies, and it evaluated key aspects of personnel policy; and
- used matched longitudinal data to explore routes through which pro-European values and staff engagement can be disrupted by organisational changes, particular types of leadership and shifts in organisational priorities.

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 978-0-19-959952-3
- R2 The European Commission: Facing the Future
Connolly, S., and **Kassim, H.**
Report, **2015**. Held on file at UEA and available at:
uea.ac.uk/documents/20142/1609087/The+European+Commison+-+Facing+the+Future-vPEilblH.pdf/a389965d-5af9-06da-7618-653877c5bc6c?t=1593531019513
- 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, circulated internally and

presented to an open meeting of the Council Secretariat. (Held on file at UEA)

R4 Supranationalism in question: Supranationalism in question: Beliefs, values, and the socializing power of the European Commission revisited.

Connolly, S. and Kassim, H.

Public Administration, **2016**, 94(3), 717-737. DOI: 10.1111/padm.12250

R5 Do international institutions matter? Socialisation and international bureaucrats

Murdoch, Z., **Kassim, H., Connolly, S.** and Geys, B.

European Journal of International Relations, **2019**, 25(3), 852-877.

DOI: 10.1177/1354066118809156

R6 Follow the Leader? The Impact of Top Leader Succession on Staff Attitudes in Organizations

Geys, B., **Connolly, S., Kassim, H.**, and Murdoch, Z.

Public Administration Review, **2020**, 80(4), 555-564. DOI: 10.1111/puar.13189

Grant information

1. **Project: The European Commission in Question.** Kassim, H. PI
Funder: ESRC Research Grant. Amount: GBP209,656. Dates: 2007-10.
2. **Project: European Commission: Facing the Future.** Connolly, S., Kassim, H
Funder: Private donation. Amount: GBP58,738. Dates: 2013-14.
3. **Project: Understanding the EU Civil Service.** Connolly, S., Kassim, H
Funder: Science Po Paris. Amount: GBP12,785. Dates: 2016-19

4. Details of the impact

At a time of internal change, the then Secretary General, [REDACTED] with the endorsement of Commission President [REDACTED], had authorised the research reported in R1, and used the findings to inform her reflections concerning the future development of the administration. As a result, the team gained the recognition and credibility that made possible the subsequent Commission projects and opened the door to the Council Secretariat. Connolly and Kassim co-lead the projects, and Kassim often led on liaison. While always maintaining academic independence, the team has worked closely with senior officeholders, to whom it has presented early results, in advance of the wider dissemination of overall findings and invitations to address other departments, groups or networks. This relationship was a key pathway to impact, as it created opportunities to communicate findings and hold exchanges on the research. For instance, in 2014-15 at the invitation of top leaders, Connolly and Kassim made 14 invited presentations, including meetings with the Vice President for Administration, the Secretary General, the Director General for Human Resources and her senior management team to brief them on the findings from the 2014 project. The Vice President for Administration spoke at the launch of the report (R2) which was live streamed across the Commission. In the Council Secretariat in 2016, Connolly and Kassim made presentations to the Secretary General and his private office. They also made a presentation of the findings to a meeting open to all staff which was attended by 300 personnel and viewed by a further 500. In 2018-19, Connolly and Kassim made 22 invited presentations to audiences in the European Commission 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, and the lunchtime seminar, which is open to all staff. Their work was reported in the staff magazine and the staff intranet carried findings from the project. At the request of the then Secretary General, [REDACTED] the team prepared a series of special briefings for President-elect, [REDACTED] which were among the materials communicated to her on her nomination [S2, S10].

Research conducted by Connolly and Kassim 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 [REDACTED] Commissions, influenced the historic reform of the College enacted by President [REDACTED], 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. UEA research (R1 and R2), research briefings and slides reporting findings from the 2014 project, was used by [REDACTED].

As President [REDACTED] recalls [S3]: *"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 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".* [REDACTED] [S2] 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: UEA research (R3) informed the reform programme initiated by the Secretary General, [REDACTED] in 2016 [S4]. In its analysis of the *"understanding of staff's own perceptions of the organisation"* [S5, DG for HR], the Kassim report (R3) played an important part in setting the context for the measures. In presentations outlining the reform, the Secretary General cited data from the report (R3) as evidence of where action was necessary and the direction of travel supported by staff. As well as showing that staff in general strongly favoured modernisation, it showed particular support for measures to improve coordination and information flows, delay the hierarchy, and personnel policy reforms [S4, Secretary General], *"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"* [S5, DG for HR].

This research led specifically 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 [S6]: *"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)"*. [S7, Head of Unit and Director of Translation Services]

More broadly, the research, which was the first project to be conducted by an external team, initiated a cultural change within the Secretariat. As well as encouraging the organisation to be more outward looking, it highlighted the value of listening to the views of staff. Following the 2016 study, an annual staff survey was introduced in the Council Secretariat for the first time *"it helped build trust ... staff became much more aware of the issues that faced them and the fact that they could influence them"* [S8, Office of the Secretary General].

The findings of the research were circulated internally, discussed by senior staff, and presented to a meeting of all staff, attended by 300 and watched by a further 500 via video streaming, in January 2017. This was considered key in developing organisational trust *"Staff confidence in the system was as a result very high, helped by the reputation of the study team for the work they had done previously in the Commission. 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"* [S5, DG for HR].

3. Briefing the von der Leyen European Commission, 2019-20: The 2018 project has influenced the von der Leyen Commission in two ways. First, as the Juncker Commission approached the end of its term in 2019, Connolly and Kassim presented their analyses of the organisational and procedural changes introduced in 2014, and their 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. Also, as [S2, S10] noted: *"I have included Professor Kassim's work in the briefing materials delivered to Ms von der Leyen"*. Outgoing Commission President [S3, S10] 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, UEA research on management and personnel policy over three Commissions has informed planning for the new HR strategy initiated by the von der Leyen Commission in 2020. Following the announcement by the new Commissioner and Director General for Human Resources of a major consultation exercise to inform HR reforms, Connolly and Kassim 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; and organisational change [R1, 2, 4, 5 & 6, S10]. 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 Connolly and Kassim *"for the three excellent sessions"*, the Principal Advisor, Professionalisation and Orientation, Directorate General Human Resources and Security, 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].

As external researchers, Connolly and Kassim have been able to pose questions to staff and investigate issues, such as the views of employees on official policies or their beliefs and values, that management cannot. Because the research draws so extensively on the insights and experience of insiders, the findings have authority and authenticity that senior officeholders recognise and value, and are valued for their quality and detail, as well as for their independence and objectivity. 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 case of the Commission, the longitudinal analysis that repeat studies have made it possible to deliver has been especially important [S9]. The analyses have contributed to organisational development in the two bodies, and helped bring about a cultural change in Council Secretariat. In the words of one official, *"You deserve recognition for the excellent work done. Your study was a game changer in the GSC"* [S6, Head of the Staff Development Unit].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1. Testimonial former Commissioner for Budget and Administration, 2017-19. 29.11.2019
- S2. Testimonial from the former Secretary General of the European Commission (2018-19) and former head of the private office of the President of the European Commission (2014-18), 31.07.2019
- S3. Testimonial from the former President of the European Commission, 2014-19, 12.07.2019
- S4. Testimonial from the Secretary General of the General Council of the Secretariat, 07.02.2020
- S5. Testimonial from Director General, General Council of the Secretariat, 18.02.2020
- S6. Testimonial and email from Head of the Staff Development Unit, General Council of the Secretariat, 05.20.2020
- S7. Testimonial from the Head of Unit and Director of Translation Services General Council of the Secretariat 14.05.2020
- S8. Testimonial from member of the private office of the Secretary General of the General Council of the Secretariat, 07.02.2020
- S9. Testimonial and email from the Principal Advisor, Professionalisation and Orientation, Directorate General Human Resources and Security, European Commission, 24.02.2021
- S10. Project findings included in briefing materials for President von der Leyen and circulated to staff