

Institution: The University of Edinburgh

Unit of Assessment: 21 Politics and International Studies

Title of case study: Understanding the European Commission

1. Summary of the impact

A major survey of the European Commission (2008-10), carried out by an international team co- led by John Peterson, has had three forms of impact. It has enabled senior managers across the Commission to gain a detailed and systematic understanding of the backgrounds, motivation and attitudes of Commission officials, knowledge which is being drawn on to inform Human Resources policies, staff training and management of reform. Secondly, the research has informed the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office's EU recruitment strategy. Thirdly, it has helped officials in the Scottish Government better understand how to engage with the Commission.

2. Underpinning research

Peterson (Professor at the University of Edinburgh since 2005) was a leading member of a team of researchers carrying out an independent study of the European Commission (2008-10). The project was initially developed within a research group led by Peterson as part of an EU-funded (FP6) EU-CONSENT network. The research was subsequently funded by an ESRC grant entitled 'The European Commission in Question', for which Hussein Kassim (University of East Anglia) was PI, and Peterson Co-I. Peterson took primary responsibility for liaison with the Commission's administration and leadership (including the Secretary-General and President) on all operational questions as well as pre-testing of the survey questionnaire. Other members of the team were Andrew Thompson, University of Edinburgh (UoA 22); Michael W. Bauer, University of Speyer; Sara Connolly, UEA; Liesbet Hooghe, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; and Renaud Dehousse, Sciences Po Paris. The online survey was administered in 2008 and the interviews conducted in 2009.

The project came at a critical time for the European Commission, which had recently undergone a series of substantial upheavals: major internal reform in the 1990s, and the recruitment of more than 3,500 new officials from 12 new member states following the 2004-7 enlargements. No large scale attitudinal study of Commission officials had ever been conducted, thus creating clear demand – on the part of both Commission senior management and EU scholars – for detailed and systematic data on the organization. The European Commission in Question was a landmark project that addresses key questions about the Commission and its staff. Developing original data, based on responses to an online survey (n=1901) representative of nationality, gender, length of service and seniority, and a structured programme of interviews with Commissioners (n=5), cabinet members (n=28) and managers (n=119), the survey delivered new knowledge about:

- the educational and professional backgrounds of Commission officials;
- the motivations of officials for joining the organization, their career trajectories, and networking behaviour;
- officials' ideological values, preferred vision of the EU and attitudes toward the expansion of EU competencies;
- attitudes within the organization to the impact of administrative reform and of the 2004 and 2007 enlargements.

The project exposes as myths several widely accepted wisdoms about the Commission. First, it shows that the Commission is neither an administration of lawyers, nor is it populated by life-long bureaucrats with no experience outside Brussels. Indeed, the Commission employs more economists and more scientists than lawyers and at least a third of officials come from private enterprise. Second, although attracted to Brussels by a 'commitment to Europe', officials are not 'federalists'. Only a minority of officials would like to see the Commission become the

government of Europe, thereby challenging the view that they want only to extend the competences of the EU and therefore their own power. Moreover, officials would like 'more Europe' in certain fields, but believe that there should be 'less Europe' in agriculture. Third, political affiliation and experience in a Commissioner's private office ('cabinet') do not affect career progression. Gender does play a role in that the small number of women in managerial posts have reached that position more rapidly than their male counterparts, but there is no evidence that, recruitment associated with enlargement apart, nationality affects promotion. Finally, the Commission is not an antiquated bureaucracy, resistant to reform. The reforms undertaken under the Prodi Commission (1999-2004) modernized the Commission, bringing it into line with other administrations.

Three further findings were important and point to future challenges for the organization: officials were dissatisfied with the way that enlargement was handled, especially in regards to the career prospects for officials joining after 1 May 2004; underrepresentation of large member states – France, Germany, Poland and the UK – threatens the legitimacy and efficacy of the Commission; and differing values between officials from old and new member states may lead to intra-departmental tensions and are likely to threaten settled policy nostrums.

3. References to the research

Hussein Kassim, John Peterson, Michael W. Bauer, Sara Connolly, Liesbet Hooghe, Renaud Dehousse, and Andrew Thompson (2013), *The European Commission of the Twenty First Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Sourced through REF2.

John Peterson (2012), 'The College of Commissioners', in *The Institutions of the European Union*, ed. John Peterson and Michael Shackleton. Oxford: Oxford University Press (3rd ed.), pp. 96-123. Available from HEI.

Grants

ESRC: RES-062-23-1188 (Hussein Kassim (PI), John Peterson (Co-I) and Andrew Thompson (Co-I), *The European Commission in Question* (c. £259k); 2008-2010.

4. Details of the impact

The research has had impact on three sets of beneficiaries: Commission management, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), and the Scottish Government.

First, the research provided senior management in the Commission with a detailed analysis of the backgrounds, careers and attitudes of its officials. The Commission's knowledge about its employees has been limited and, as outside researchers, the team were able to ask questions which management could not ask its own staff. The interest of senior staff in the research has been evident from the outset with the Secretariat General providing considerable support, granting the team a rare level of access whilst respecting their need for independence. The Commission requested regular updates on the findings, with Kassim and Peterson making a series of reports on provisional findings to the Secretariat-General, the President's cabinet and senior officials from the Directorate-General (DG) for Human Resources and Security in 2009 and 2010. Following final completion of the analyses, the team were invited to make presentations to key constituencies within the Commission. From July 2010 to July 2013, presentations and briefings have been made on 14 separate occasions. These include an overview to 50 top managers at the Directors General weekly meeting in July 2010; briefings to senior management teams in six different Directorates-General from July to Oct 2011; a presentation to the *Cabinet* of the Vice President of the Commission in July 2012; and, in September 2012, a presentation to the Commission's Senior Management Review, attended by senior 400 managers and addressed by the President of the Commission, the Vice President of the Commission, and the Secretary-General of the Council of Ministers. Senior management have requested video recordings of these events, copies of the presentation slides, and DG-specific policy briefings.

The value senior management attached to the results is indicated by the President of the Commission sharing a platform with a member of the project team to address senior Commission officials for the September 2012 event; and the Commission profiling the research in its in-house magazine *Commission en Direct*. The President commented in January 2010 that 'The project's findings will help us make the Commission a more efficient and effective administration that better serves European citizens' (5.1)

More specifically, the project findings have helped inform Commission management's knowledge of its own officials, enabling them to 'develop a more fine grain understanding of the view of staff' (Secretary General of the European Commission) (5.2). The Secretary General has confirmed that the findings 'fed into discussions... on recruitment, career progression, reform and reform management' (5.3). The Learning and Development Unit of DG Human Resources and Security organised a lunchtime seminar in July 2013 at which Hussein and Peterson presented the findings to 200 officials from across the organisation. The Head of Unit noted that the turnout 'was very impressive and the feedback has been extremely positive'. He has requested copies of the key publication to use for training purposes (5.3).

Second, analysis of the nationality and career profiles of Commission officials contributed to Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) reflections on how the UK can improve the recruitment of British nationals to the European administration. In August 2012 Kassim delivered a presentation at the FCO to an audience of 40 civil servants from across Whitehall, focusing on the representation of British officials at the Commission. The UK is the most poorly represented member state in the Commission, and especially under-represented in powerful DGs such as Competition, Economic and Financial Policy and Agriculture. Following the meeting, the Europe Director in the FCO wrote that 'we received a lot of positive feedback on the event and on the research that you provided, including at Ministerial level' (5.4) She stated that the research had 'served to confirm or crystallise a number of important points for us, enhanced our understanding of the key issues, and the policy advice you gave on the back of your research has provided valuable food-for-thought'. More specifically, she noted that 'your research will feed into HMG's policy analysis and formulation regarding how to take forward the recruitment agenda over the next 6 months' (5.5). Connolly and Kassim subsequently participated in a 'brainstorming' meeting with senior officials on the future of recruitment policy.

Third, the research has informed the Scottish Government about the staff of the Commission. At this critical juncture of Scottish politics, there is recognition that officials from across the Scottish Government will need to engage more effectively with officials across the Commission. In November 2012, Peterson and Kassim presented the findings of the project to the Scottish Government at an event organised with the External Affairs Division, attracting officials from seven different divisions (5.5). A questionnaire completed by attendees confirmed the value of the session in adding new knowledge about the organization. In written comments, participants agreed that the briefing had facilitated a more nuanced understanding of Commission officials' backgrounds and views, providing attendees with a better sense of how to liaise when engaging with the administration (5.6).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 Factual statement, President of the Commission.

5.2 Factual statement, Secretary General of the European Commission.

5.3 Email from Head of Unit, Learning & Development, European Commission Human Resources and Security Directorate-General.

5.4 Letter from the Europe Directorate, UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

5.5 Director of External Affairs Division, Scottish Government.

5.6 Scottish Government event questionnaire returns (available on request).