

INFORMATION NOTE

The new competition model – EPSO responds to questions & concerns

1. Origin and essence of the new competition model

Question/concern: Has the new model been properly prepared? Was an impact assessment done?

Yes. EPSO has been actively preparing a new competition model since May 2020. A 5-year Roadmap was endorsed by the EPSO Management Board in June 2021, but work did not start from scratch. Reflections on the reform of the selection process commenced several years ago. First, recommendations by a Special Working Group, set up by the interinstitutional Management Board, EPSO's governing body, were presented in a Report issued in 2019. Furthermore, the European Court of Auditors conducted an audit on EPSO's selection procedures¹.

Based on the outcome of the two above-mentioned work streams, EPSO established five task forces to reflect on five topics², considered key priorities. The task forces worked, first internally and then interinstitutionally. They delivered proposals and/or action plans of which many have already been implemented or on their way. As follow-up, EPSO was requested by its Management Board to launch some pilot projects and further analysis (e.g. a competition with a full 24-language regime, cost calculation methodology).

This reflection happened in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which revealed the vulnerability of the in-person testing halting competition delivery for 9 months and complicating physical delivery of testing for more than two years. The pandemic had thus considerable impact, not only on the priorities but also on the scale and rapidity of the changes needed. A good example was the move to remote testing. It was either that or nothing.

In the run up to the adoption of the new competition model on 31 January 2023, EPSO had already presented two alternative proposals. Both featured a continuation of the oral tests as part of the selection process. The first proposal was turned down following a comprehensive legal assessment. During the discussion in the Management Board on the second one, a Board member advanced the idea of dropping the oral tests as a way to accelerate the process radically. A timeframe of competitions lasting between one and two years clearly does not respond to the expectations of candidates and recruiters. It transpired that all institutions were anyway conducting panel interviews themselves at the recruitment stage.

¹ Special Report 23/2020: The European Personnel Selection Office: Time to adapt the selection process to changing recruitment needs: <https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications?did=55848>

² (i) Diversity of the candidate pool, (ii) language regime in the open competitions, (iii) optimal functioning of the Selection Boards, (iv) transparency of the selection process, and (v) cooperation with the institutions.

EPSO was tasked to conduct a SWOT analysis of the proposal, on the basis of which, the Management Board concluded that the proposal was fit for purpose. Thus, the consequences and impact of the new competition model have been discussed in-depth at interinstitutional level and endorsed by EPSO's Management Board.

Question/concern: Wouldn't the laureates of the new competitions be less qualified if the selection process is shortened?

EPSO aims for speed, simplification and modernisation without compromising on the quality of the future officials, who should be of the 'highest standard of ability, efficiency and integrity', as per Article 27 of the EU Staff Regulations. Candidates featuring on future reserve lists will be tested adequately and the process remains rigorous. For selections under the new competition model, successful candidates will have to show strong cognitive abilities, be among the best in field-related knowledge and in drafting skills. They will also need to have the right diploma and/or working experience. If the recruiters feel that evaluating certain additional competencies would be needed, EPSO is ready to offer assistance through a range of services (see more below).

Question/concern: What are then the main novelties of the new model and its advantages?

Novelties

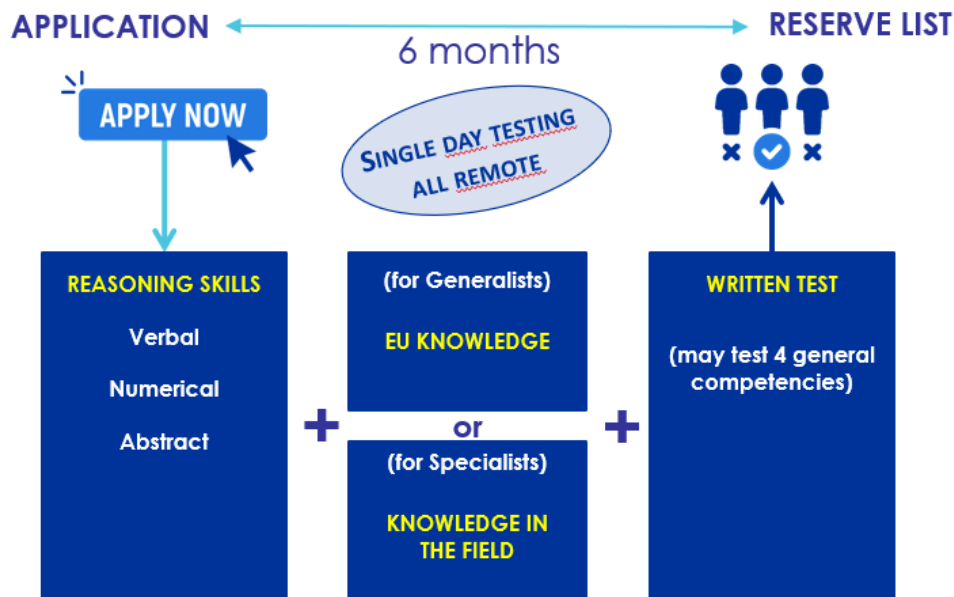
- The 'Assessment Centre' and its related oral tests cease to exist. Therefore, oral tests will no longer be part of the selection procedures.
- The verbal, numerical and logical reasoning tests will remain part of the selection procedures. However, candidates will only need a pass mark.
- In the case of 'generalist' competitions (e.g. the popular AD5 entry-level competition open to all profiles) an EU knowledge test will be introduced.
- The focus of the EU knowledge test will be on meaningful substance questions related to the functioning of the EU, its policies and procedures.
- All competitions will also include a written test (usually a case study) to assess candidates' drafting skills.
- All competitions will be run online via remotely proctored tests.
- A digital skills test may also be introduced for some competitions, in line with our institutional clients' needs.
- With competitions based exclusively on written tests, it will be possible for EPSO to operate with much smaller Selection Boards and, importantly, to reduce competition timelines from a current average of 13 months to just 6 months, and eventually, less.

Advantages

- **Speed:** the aim is to complete competitions within 6 months and eventually less (from the moment of publication of the Notice of Competition to the establishment of the reserve list). Speed also means better preparation, better tools, less tests, standardised portfolio of tests, tests that are quicker to score, streamlined processes.
- **Efficiency and simplification:** all tests will take place online in one single testing session, therefore in one day. Simplification means that something needs to drop out. Workflow needs to contain the necessary processes but only those. It is not possible to do everything as before but still be quicker, simpler, more modern, more diverse.
- **Modernisation:** online testing is faster, more flexible, in line with today's digitalised world, 'greener' and more accessible to the vast majority of candidates, wherever they are. Modernisation also means better tools, digitalisation, automation of processes and also greener competition ecosystem in general.
- **Transparency:** the sources used for the creation of the EU knowledge test will be pre-published online by EPSO, levelling the playing field among candidates.
- **Quality:** in the new EPSO competition model, successful candidates will have to show satisfactory cognitive abilities, be among the best in field-related knowledge and in drafting skills. They will also have the right diploma and/or working experience. Maintaining the quality means that the tests need to be precise and measure the required skills, knowledge and competences. The overall evaluation has to take into account also qualifications and/or working experience.
- **Competencies:** The [general competency framework](#) (April 2022) remains valid.
- **Diversity:** with a faster, leaner and more accessible competition model, EPSO also wishes to stimulate applications by a more diverse pool of candidates. Greater diversity means promoting the attractiveness of the EU careers, targeted outreach measures and quicker and simpler competitions.

Question/concern: Can you give me an overview of the new model? What are the main steps in the competition phase?

Main features of the new model



Main steps

- Publication of the Notice of Competition
- Self-assessment of eligibility via a specific survey³, followed by application
- Reasoning tests on a pass/fail basis
- Digital skills test (when applicable)
- EU knowledge test (for 'generalist' competitions) or Multiple Choice Questionnaire (MCQ) in the field (for 'specialist' competitions) - ranked
- Written test (e.g. case study, for most competitions, with a focus on drafting skills) corrected only for those with the best results in MCQ
- Eligibility checks at an appropriate stage (final verification before placing on the Reserve List; checking of second language, if necessary)
- Reserve list⁴
- Single 'Request for Review' window

³ Experience Assessment Survey Instrument (EASI): EASI is a tool aimed at providing optional feedback to interested candidates to help them understand better their likelihood of admission (eligibility) to a competition, based on their qualifications and professional experience, compared to the requirements laid down in the Notice of Competition. The feedback will only be shared with candidates themselves and will not be shared with any member of the Selection Board.

⁴ Database of successful candidates, published by EPSO at the end of each competition, used by EPSO's institutional clients for their specific recruitment needs.

2. The switch to remote testing

Question/concern: Why is online testing better than classic testing in test centres? What is EPSO doing to solve the problems that occurred with the first experiments in mass-scale online testing? What about access for citizens from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds who have no access to a computer and internet connection?

The Covid-19 pandemic created important recruitment difficulties in the institutions because of severely delayed competition activity. On the positive side, this set of circumstances accelerated the modernisation of the testing mode from physical to remote testing with positive impact on the accessibility of competitions to the candidates all over Europe and on greening of the process by elimination of the need to travel for candidates.

We acknowledge that there have been technical issues in the first wave of mass remote testing sessions, notably in competition EPSO/AST/154/22, which ultimately had to be cancelled. The right balance between anti-cheating measures and candidate experience and privacy needs to be calibrated carefully. We are fine-tuning the processes as well as launching a strategic discussion in the Management Board on this. The situation is already improving and technical incidents are clearly decreasing. EPSO intends to start publishing competition related statistics to increase transparency and put individual complaints, as well as rumours, under a factual lens.

Remote testing is the delivery mode of the future and responds to the evolution in the market of large-scale staff selections. It is flexible and accessible from wherever the candidate is and entails no travelling costs (=greener). Online selection is also more modern and in line with digitalisation of the institutions. It facilitates access to open competitions for citizens from less advantageous socio-economic backgrounds. One of the objectives of the new model is greater diversity of the applicants in the wide sense of the term: profile, background, origin. The transition to remote helps the EU institutions to attract talent outside the 'Brussels bubble'.

Owning a computer is not obligatory to sit EPSO's tests – candidates can borrow one or arrange for access to a computer and appropriate internet connection on the premises of a third party, if one is not available in their location. Online selection tests may be run on a corporate computer but multiple security controls would have to be disabled or changed by an authorised administrator.⁵

Test centres are a fading field of business. There also seems to be a somewhat nostalgic illusion that on-site testing always ran perfectly and all issues and incidents are now due to the new remote delivery mode. This is far from the truth.

There have always been issues – this is in the nature of mass testing events. Some things might sometimes go wrong, even if preparations are conducted carefully by experienced professionals.

⁵ EPSO has published a Note on this subject: <https://epso.europa.eu/en/corporate-computers-and-online-tests>

What has changed is that these incidents tend to be amplified within the EU institutions due to increasing numbers of internal staff participating in open competitions.

3. Data protection in remote testing, contracting arrangements

Question/concern: How is EPSO protecting the personal data of the candidates while using an American based company?

Data protection is an essential part of EPSO's processes. A specific [privacy statement](#) on personal data protection within the framework of an open competition applies. The parent company of the EPSO contractor is US-based; the company with which EPSO signed a framework contract is based in Ireland. EU-origin was a precondition to qualify for applying to the call for tender in compliance with EU contracting rules. Our new Framework Contract ensures that the data collection that occurs during EPSO operations complies with EU data protection rules (it is stored in the EU, for a limited duration, with the usual safeguards and guarantees applying). The Framework Contract is solid as regards data protection requirements.

EPSO is fully aware that supervision of full compliance of data processing by the contractor is a complex issue, requiring proper attention in the preparation of the launch of the new model. For this purpose, we are in regular contact with the contractor, and we are collaborating intensively with the European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS) and the Data Protection Officer of the European Commission in the matter. We have a Data Coordinator of our own who is constantly updating our knowledge and experience. Currently, we are being audited by the EDPS on the preparation of the new competition model, including the use of remotely proctored testing. In this process, we are transparent, and we are committed to follow the advice already received as well as the recommendations that will follow.

Question/concern: Is EPSO outsourcing its role on competition-organisation to private companies with the new competition model?

No. In fact, nothing has changed in the distribution of roles and responsibilities as they are defined in EPSO's Founding Decisions and Staff Regulations, Annex III. EPSO is accountable to its Management Board where all institutions are represented. According to the Staff Regulations, the evaluation of candidates is entrusted to Selection Boards, composed of staff members of the institutions.

EPSO's role is, has always been and will continue to be about the overall organisation of the competition and in ensuring that uniform standards are applied. We do use external companies both for test delivery and test development, but we remain fully in charge of what and how these contractors deliver and operate. We define the specifications, and we are also responsible to follow up with the contractors in case they do not operate within what has agreed in their framework contract. Please be also reassured that all our contractors have been selected following the procurement rules and procedures of the European Commission. The market is evolving worldwide and EPSO is also adapting to the new realities and demands.

4. Right to appeal and candidate experience, equal treatment

Question/concern: Are candidates' complaints considered? Why EPSO does not offer retesting to all candidates who experienced technical issues?

EPSO investigates all the complaints brought to its knowledge by the candidates. The *General rules governing open competitions* annexed to each Notice of Competition describe the avenues of appeal. Retesting opportunities are offered to candidates whose complaints meet the relevant criteria. EPSO generally gives the candidate the benefit of the doubt in cases where it is not clear what caused the issue. However, it is equally important to be aware that, because EPSO competitions are highly selective, there are also a certain number of candidates who try to obtain a retesting opportunity even if they do not fulfil the criteria. The purpose of the competitions is not that candidates are retested until they pass. The fact that somebody does not pass, does not mean that that person is unqualified or untalented. It simply means that a certain number of other candidates did better. This is how merit-based selection works.

The pass rate of EPSO competitions is on average around 4%, with variation from 1% to 13%, depending on the competition (statistics from year 2022). This means that on average 96% of the candidates are disappointed. It goes without saying that there are certainly capable people who do not pass. According to EPSO's candidate surveys, a candidate has on average tried 5 times before passing a competition. This information might be helpful in dealing with disappointment.

Question/concern: The experience with recent open competitions revealed the inadequacy of remote testing – what is EPSO doing to ensure a positive candidate experience? Why was competition EPSO/AST/154/22 (AST3) cancelled?

It is true that in recent EPSO competitions there has been quite a lot of noise about negative candidate experience during the remote testing sessions. For example, in the now cancelled EPSO/AST/154/22, EPSO's candidate contact service received 967 questions and complaints. 197 candidates logged complaints on legitimate technical or organisational issues (4,2% of tested candidates). A failure rate of up to 5% (on the first attempt) is considered acceptable in the testing industry. 107 candidates were given a retesting opportunity, 90 others were not because their complaints did not meet the criteria. An extraordinary Management Board meeting was convened twice to discuss the issues encountered. EPSO also conducted an operational and a legal assessment of the situation. In both of those analyses, the conclusion was to propose to move forward with the competition as planned.

However, as this competition was the first large-scale remote-only testing event and complaints covered different aspects of the competition organisation, notably the booking of the testing slots, technical incidents in launching the test, proctor behaviour and confusion in where to get help in case of issues, many of the Management Board members were not satisfied with that option.

Therefore, EPSO decided to cancel the competition and focus on improvements to the candidate experience before launching a new competition in the fields concerned. In comparison, in competition EPSO/AST/155/2022, where testing was conducted soon after with some quick fixes, the number of complaints was below average.

Complaints are an opportunity for EPSO and its contractor to keep improving the procedures in a spirit of continuous development. Even in the situations where it would be possible to say that the number of complaints is below the average and therefore acceptable, we still investigate and learn every time. It should be recognised that a flawless online testing experience for each and every one of thousands of candidates is not a realistic objective in the short term. We are striving for a test portfolio that will remain very challenging, and for a delivery mode that would be feasible with proper preparation and by following the instructions.

Question/concern: Isn't EPSO paying too much attention to the concerns expressed by internal candidates (e.g. in case of the cancellation of EPSO/AST/154/22)? Is this justified as the majority of candidates managed to do the tests?

It is important to highlight that internal candidates, i.e. staff already working for the institutions, should under no circumstances be favoured in open competitions. Equal treatment is an essential principle, and all candidates should have the same conditions when applying to and sitting tests. It is statistically evident that internal candidates do well in the competitions. This is most probably because of their high motivation, knowledge of the environment and suitability of their profiles. This is merit-based and completely acceptable. There is a risk, though, in the treatment of candidates. This risk comes from the fact that internal candidates have avenues for voicing their disappointment that external candidates do not have. Therefore, noise alone without proper investigation of facts should never be used as a basis of decision-making.

Mass testing in both in-person or remote mode is prone to incidents, because of high numbers of candidates, their (understandable) nervousness in the situation itself, the need to have credible anti-cheating measures in place as well as candidates' varying expectation levels. Having better IT tools would be of great help. We are working on improvements behind the scenes but because of high expectations, it is not possible to pause competition activity while we are preparing for improvements.

5. Recruitment-related assistance

Question/concern: EPSO is pushing work to the EU institutions by the elimination of oral tests as part of the selection process. How will EPSO contribute to the recruitment stage?

We understand the concerns regarding the recruitment procedures for successful candidates (laureates) and the endeavour to secure the most suitable talents for the EU institutions. However, according to EPSO's Founding Decision⁶ and the Staff Regulations (Annex III, Article 7), EPSO is tasked with the selection of officials whereas recruitment is the exclusive responsibility of the EU institutions. EPSO's role does not change after the adoption of the new competition model; it is just mandated to do so differently with the overall objective of achieving the result quicker.

Matters related to the recruitment stage remain outside EPSO's competence and it is not for EPSO to comment on how recruitment procedures should be adapted. EPSO has reiterated its willingness to be of assistance to the institutions during the recruitment phase. For this purpose, we have presented to the EU institutions a draft *Recruitment Support Guide* based on three tiers⁷ of assistance offered at the recruitment stage. All these services are designed with a view to facilitate the recruitment and to contribute to its quality and consistency. However, it is for each institution to decide whether and to what extent they need these services as well as how to use them. The choice of whom to train in case of Tier 1 or whom to send to further assessment under Tier 2 or Tier 3 is in the hands of recruiting institutions.

EPSO has created some guidelines for the planning and put some limits on the numbers of candidates for capacity reasons. The Guide is a draft, and we are willing to adapt it according to the needs of recruiters and experiences gained.

[Electronically signed]

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⁶ Decision 2002/621/EC

⁷ **Tier 1** - includes training, advice, material for competency-based interviews and oral presentation;

Tier 2 - EPSO support & partial delivery: same as above + delivery, by EPSO psychologists, of one or two oral exercises and evaluation of selected competencies;

Tier 3 - EPSO delivery: includes services provided under level 1 and, in addition: EPSO's psychologists can conduct the evaluation of general competencies in advisory capacity, and provide a competency profile indicating candidate's strengths and weaknesses OR exercises and tools to evaluate specific personality traits.