

Decision in case 22/2017/NF on how the European Commission assessed a traineeship application

Decision

Case 22/2017/NF - Opened on 11/05/2017 - Decision on 13/12/2018 - Institution concerned European Commission (No maladministration found) |

The case concerned the European Commission's assessment of supporting documents for a traineeship application, which led it to declare the complainant's application ineligible.

The Ombudsman inquired into the issue and found nothing to suggest that the Commission was wrong in its conclusion that the complainant's application was ineligible. The Ombudsman therefore closed the case with a finding of no maladministration. The Ombudsman welcomed the measures adopted by the Commission to improve the traineeship application form and to allow for a more practical way to prove language knowledge.

Background to the complaint

1. The complainant applied for a traineeship in the European Commission, to start in March 2017. [1] The complainant's application was among those chosen for further consideration in the trainee selection process [2] . The Commission therefore asked her to submit supporting documents, on the basis of which the Commission considered the complainant's application ineligible. The Commission had issues with the complainant's double bachelor degree, her certificate regarding her knowledge of English, and a work certificate.
2. The complainant contacted the Commission, giving explanations regarding the supporting documents that she had submitted. The Commission maintained its view that the application was ineligible. It argued that the complainant had failed to provide proof of having two bachelor degrees, as indicated in her application, and of having a proficient ('C1') level of English. The complainant had also submitted a work certificate that did not contain an end date for the job.
3. Dissatisfied with the Commission's reply, the complainant turned to the Ombudsman in December 2016.

The inquiry



4. The Ombudsman opened an inquiry into how the Commission had assessed the complainant's supporting documents for her traineeship application.

5. In the course of the inquiry, the Ombudsman received the Commission's reply on the complaint. The Commission informed the Ombudsman that it would consider modifying the traineeship application form with regard to double degrees and review its practice on how applicants can prove their language skills. The complainant did not make any comments in the course of the inquiry.

Arguments presented to the Ombudsman

6. The complainant stated that she had provided appropriate proof of her bachelor degree being a 'bi-national double bachelor', awarded by a German and a Spanish university. She had also submitted a language certificate proving English language knowledge at C1 level. The complainant was not aware that the Commission would not accept a work certificate that did not contain an end date for the job.

7. The Commission stated that the complainant had indicated in her application that she has two bachelor degrees. The Commission thus assumed that the complainant has two *separate* bachelor degrees. The supporting documents showed that she has a three year bi-national *double degree*. The supporting documents did not, therefore, confirm the information that the complainant had provided in her application. The Commission assesses university degrees based on the number of study credits and the corresponding study time needed to obtain a degree. The complainant has studied for three years and obtained a bi-national double degree, corresponding to one academic title issued by two universities.

8. The Commission confirmed that applicants could prove their language level either with a language certificate or by having passed four university exams in the language in question, provided that the level of the language was indicated for the four exams. The complainant had indeed provided a language certificate. However, the certificate showed a B2 level of English, which is lower than the minimum C1 level required.

9. The Commission clarified that applicants do not have to indicate, in their application, an end date for *ongoing* work experience. However, the information provided in the application and the related supporting document have to match. The complainant had indicated an end date for the relevant *past* work experience in her application, but provided a certificate showing no end date.

10. The Commission thus found that the complainant's application was ineligible because of the above discrepancies between the information given in her application and the related supporting documents.

11. Nevertheless, in the course of the inquiry, the Commission informed the Ombudsman that it



would consider modifying the traineeship application form to make it easier for applicants to declare double degrees in a correct manner. It would also consider reviewing its policy for proving language skills. In July 2018, the Commission informed the Ombudsman that it will use a modified application form as of the March 2019 traineeship session, making it easier to declare double degrees. It further stated that knowledge of languages may now be proven with university degrees, diplomas or certificates *following studies in a particular language* (instead of proof of four university *exams* setting out the language level). Knowledge of languages may also be proven by *language* certificates or proof of bilingual education at secondary school level.

The Ombudsman's assessment

12. Based on the explanations provided by the Commission, which have not been put in question by the complainant, the Ombudsman finds nothing to suggest that the Commission was wrong to conclude, on the basis of the complainant's supporting documents, that her application was ineligible.

13. The Ombudsman welcomes the fact that the Commission nevertheless took this case as an opportunity to reflect on, and improve, its practices regarding traineeship applications. The Commission has modified the traineeship application form, as well as the information provided on the FAQ section [3] of its traineeship website. It now alerts applicants to the fact that they should indicate a double bachelor as *one* degree, explaining the specific degree requirements in the comments field. The Commission now allows for a more practical way to prove language knowledge, namely by accepting university degrees, diplomas or certificates following studies in a particular language.

Conclusions

Based on the inquiry, the Ombudsman closes this case with the following conclusions :

There was no maladministration by the Commission in declaring the complainant's traineeship application ineligible on the basis of the supporting documents.

The European Ombudsman welcomes the measures adopted by the Commission to make it easier for traineeship applicants to fill in the application form and to prove language knowledge.

The complainant and the Commission will be informed of this decision.

Emily O'Reilly

European Ombudsman



Strasbourg, 13/12/2018

[1] The European Commission has a dedicated traineeship website, which can be consulted here: http://ec.europa.eu/stages/home_en [Link]

[2] The first step in the Commission's pre-selection phase for traineeships is the so-called 'pre-identification' of applicants based on the Commission's assessment of their applications: "*Every single application is assessed on the basis of academic profile, language skills and additional qualities, such as international profile, work experience, publications and motivation. A ranking is then established and around 2000 candidates with the highest scores are pre-identified for the Virtual Blue Book.*" In a second phase, the Commission checks the information stated in pre-identified applicants' applications against supporting documents. Those applicants whose applications are found to be eligible in light of the supporting documents are then considered 'pre-selected' and are allowed to proceed further in the traineeship selection procedure. See: https://ec.europa.eu/stages/how-to-apply/selection-process_en [Link]

[3] " Q: *How should I introduce a double-bachelor / double-master?* A: *If you have a double bachelor/masters (for example, 2 years in Spain and 2 years in Germany), please ensure that you explain your situation fully by selecting available options on the drop down list of "completed studies"/"ongoing studies", and use the comments field for any additional information that you deem relevant.* " See: https://ec.europa.eu/stages/faq_en [Link]