

## **The use by the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO) of remote testing only for the 'pre-selection' tests in a selection procedure to recruit EU civil servants (Assistants AST3 - EPSO/AST/154/22)**

Case opened

**Case** OI/1/2023/VS - **Opened on** 15/03/2023 - **Decision on** 22/01/2024 - **Institution concerned** European Personnel Selection Office ( No further inquiries justified ) |

Director

European Personnel Selection Office

Dear Ms X,

I have decided to open an own-initiative inquiry concerning how the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO) carried out the pre-selection tests in selection procedure EPSO/AST/154/22. This matter has come to my attention through the significant number of complaints we have received. Complainants consider it unfair that the tests were carried out exclusively remotely. They raise a number of grievances, including about the requirements for sitting the tests remotely, technical issues encountered during the tests and issues with receiving assistance from EPSO and its contractor (Prometric) when problems arose.

While I understand EPSO's desire to shorten the time that selection procedures take [1] , and that remote testing can play a role in this, there appear to be legitimate concerns about the implications of this approach in terms of equal opportunities, as well as technical issues. It would also seem that EPSO could have improved how it communicated with and made available assistance to candidates sitting the tests.

Tests taking place only remotely

I am particularly concerned that the requirements for sitting the tests remotely [2] and the failure to offer alternatives to remote testing could, in practice, mean that some candidates were not able to participate. It is difficult to see how the practical implications of such requirements contribute to EPSO's aim [3] to attract a more diverse candidate pool, including concerning



socio-economic background. Existing data on access to a computer from home clearly shows that in no EU Member State is access universal [4] . Internet connectivity varies across the EU [5] .

I would therefore appreciate it if EPSO could reply to the following questions:

- 1) The vacancy notice for competition EPSO/AST/154/22 states that the format and practical arrangements ('delivery mode') for the pre-selection and other tests will be specified in the invitation letters to the tests. At what stage did EPSO decide to organise the pre-selection tests exclusively remotely for this competition? What are the reasons behind the decision?
- 2) When deciding to carry out the tests for this competition exclusively remotely did EPSO carry out a prior assessment? If so, did this assessment take into account the need to ensure equality of access and treatment for candidates, also taking into account the socio-economic situation, including access to a private computer?
- 3) The invitation letters set out detailed requirements and instructions for candidates invited to sit the pre-selection tests, in particular the requirement that the tests are taken on a private computer, with detailed technical specifications, for which the candidates have administrator rights. Candidates without access to such a computer were, in practice, excluded from sitting the tests or forced to incur significant financial costs. When such candidates contacted EPSO, it did not propose solutions, other than 'to find a computer'. Could EPSO elaborate on its response to these access problems? Could EPSO also elaborate on how it considers this requirement, and the provision of a charged phone line for technical support, to be consistent with the principle that EPSO exams be free of charge?
- 4) The invitation letters also set out the requirement that candidates have an internet connection speed of at least 1.0 Mbps. Given that not all households in the EU have internet access [6] and not all of those have a reliable connection of at least 1.0 Mbps, and given that the invitation letters also set out the requirement for candidates to be in a private room with no third party entering the room, did EPSO reflect on the fact that these requirements may result in unequal access? If so, did EPSO reflect on how to take this into account?

How the tests were carried out in practice and how support was provided when problems occurred

Remote testing places a lot of responsibility for the practical and technical arrangements on candidates. When issues arise at a test centre, there are staff present who are trained to find a solution and to do the necessary reporting. In contrast, when tests are taken at home, candidates themselves need to figure out how to resolve technical issues. In this selection procedure, they were also obliged to navigate a 12-page document with further references to different websites. It is of utmost importance that candidates receive clear, user-friendly and unambiguous information about how to deal with technical issues and that there are well-functioning support and reporting channels.



In this context, I would appreciate it if EPSO could reply to the following questions:

5) Did EPSO allow any of the candidates to sit the test at a test centre? If yes, please provide us with additional details that would enable us to understand the situation and EPSO's decisions.

6) How many technical support staff were available online during each timeslot for candidates facing technical difficulties? When a technical problem occurred on the testing day, who were candidates expected to contact and by when?

7) Did EPSO adopt specific rules on the rescheduling of tests for these remotely operated tests? If so, could EPSO please share these? If not, could EPSO please share the rules that applied?

Candidates were required to undergo a 360° inspection of the room where they intended to take the test, including the contents of furniture in the room. In this context, how does EPSO and Prometric ensure the protection of privacy of candidates?

9) Did EPSO have in place rules or give instructions to candidates covering different scenarios when technical or other problems occur (for example, if there is a problem with a candidate's internet connection right before or during the test).

10) Did candidates report issues with accessing and receiving help through the chat function? How did EPSO deal with those complaints?

11) Did any of the candidates report being refused a ticket number? How did EPSO treat those complaints?

My inquiry will seek to assist EPSO in identifying and making possible systemic improvements with a view to enhancing the experience of candidates and guaranteeing equality of opportunity. Defining good administrative practices for online, remote testing is crucial, as this method of testing is likely to increase over the coming years.

As a first step, I would be grateful to receive your reply, by 15 June 2023, to the issues raised in this letter. I would also welcome any additional observations relevant to this inquiry that you may wish to share.

I intend to publish your reply on our website.

As a second step, following your written reply, my inquiry team will seek to organise a meeting with EPSO representatives in order to clarify any remaining questions.

Should you require any further information about this inquiry, please contact the inquiry officer responsible, Valentina Stoeva.



I do not intend to open inquiries into each of the individual complaints I have received related to the selection procedure, while this inquiry is ongoing. However, if needed, I may make exceptions to this approach in certain cases.

Yours sincerely,

Emily O'Reilly

European Ombudsman

Strasbourg, 15/03/2023

Enclosure: **Copies of the complaints received by the European Ombudsman**

1. 2017/2022/VS
2. 2032/2022/VS
3. 2062/2022/VS
4. 2082/2022/VS
5. 2083/2022/VS
6. 2092/2022/VS
7. 2100/2022/VS
8. 2101/2022/VS
9. 2102/2022/VS
10. 2162/2022/VS
11. 2164/2022/VS
12. 2169/2022/VS



13. 2173/2022/VS

14. 130/2023/VS

15. 164/2023/VS

16. 168/2023/VS

17. 186/2023/VS

18. 303/2023/VS

19. 414/2023/VS

[1] As EPSO has publicly stated:

<https://epso.europa.eu/en/introducing-faster-leaner-and-more-accessible-competition-model>  
[Link]

[2] Notably the computer, technical and room specifications.

[3] See, for instance, p. 9 of the 2022 EPSO Annual management plan, which speaks of equality, diversity and inclusion:

[https://commission.europa.eu/publications/management-plan-2022-european-personnel-selection-office\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/publications/management-plan-2022-european-personnel-selection-office_en)  
[Link]

See also the European Court of Auditors Special Report 23/2022:

<https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/Pages/DocItem.aspx?did=55848> [Link]

[4] <https://data.oecd.org/ict/access-to-computers-from-home.htm> [Link]

[5] <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20220822-1> [Link]

[6] <https://www.statista.com/statistics/377585/household-internet-access-in-eu28/> [Link]