

**European Personnel Selection Office's reply to the request of information
concerning the joint inquiry of the European Ombudsman
into complaints 1337/2017/EA and 1338/2017/EA**

General introduction

First of all, EPSO wishes to sincerely thank the European Ombudsman and the colleagues of her inquiry team for having met the relevant EPSO staff in the context of the inquiry at stake. EPSO is also grateful for having received an extension of the initial deadline in order to submit the requested comments.

Background to the cases

The complainants are two visually impaired candidates who participated in several EPSO competitions.

With regard to the accessibility of EPSO competitions, they raise three concerns - quoted hereafter in italics - for which EPSO respectfully provides the EO with the following answers:

"1. The online application form used by EPSO, including the form for requesting accommodation for special needs during the tests, is not fully accessible to visually impaired candidates who use 'screen readers' to read webpages".

As a general remark, please note that regular accessibility screenings are performed in order to detect any potential accessibility issues, and corrective measures are adopted if necessary.

Due to some persistent IT constraints (specified hereunder), EPSO acknowledges that unfortunately the online application form for candidates is still not fully accessible to visually impaired candidates who use screen-readers to read webpages.

Nevertheless, until an appropriate IT solution is implemented, candidates can request a fully accessible and adapted format of the application form (Word format) and personal assistance.

In order to make the application process as autonomous as possible, EPSO has been investing in the so-called "*Candidate Portal*", a unique applicant account with a special focus on user-friendliness.

In fact, this system was conceived to allow EPSO candidates to benefit from a modern, intuitive, easy-to-use interface to manage their EPSO profile, apply for selection procedures, monitor their progress and communicate with EPSO. It is planned to be embedded in the EU Careers website allowing for a single user experience, to comply with accessibility standards and be mobile responsive. All candidate facing features and functionalities are envisaged to be available in all 24 EU official languages.

To date, for a number of technical reasons explained later in reply to question A of the European Ombudsman, this solution has not yet been implemented.

In addition to the alternative measures mentioned above, EPSO continues to improve the application process and to make all its communication and testing as accessible as possible.

"2. The complainants had selected either the option for a 'screen reader' and 'refreshable braille display' when filling out the online form for requesting the accommodation of special needs, or subsequently asked for a screen reader. However, these options were not available to them when they sat their computer-based tests. Instead, they were provided with braille transcriptions of the tests and a sighted assistant".

EPSO organises test sessions across the world in 88 various testing centres via a contractor for the current AD cycle. For organisational, logistical, infrastructural reasons, it is not possible for the contractor to provide specific assistive technologies to candidates in all testing centres around the world at this time.

Nevertheless, for competitions in which computer-based tests take place during the Assessment Centre phase, EPSO is able to offer this assistive technology because tests are organised exclusively on its own premises in Brussels.

EPSO is aware of the need to make the use of assistive technology possible at the CBT phase upfront in test centres, hence we are researching a number of options together with our contractor in order to put in place an appropriate transitional solution. For the time being, it is only able to offer braille transcription of the tests and/or a sighted assistant.

"3. The measures put in place by EPSO meant that visually impaired candidates could not sit the computer-based tests independently. As such, the measures could not be considered to comply with the concept of 'reasonable accommodation' of the needs of persons with disabilities, as provided for under Article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities".

EPSO acknowledges that the alternative measures put in place are not always enough to enable some candidates with particular disabilities, such as visual impairments, to sit the computer-based tests independently but - at the same time- it would like to emphasise that it is striving to find a reasonable solution in order to ensure that persons with disabilities have access, on an equal basis with others, to the testing environment.

The complainants' desired outcome

EPSO appreciates the fact that the candidates have not only informed us of their concerns but also of their desired outcome. It must be underlined that EPSO fully shares their desired outcome and is eager to clarify the following:

The complainants would like that:

"1. EPSO should review the online application form, including the online form for requesting accommodation for special needs, so that these are made fully accessible to users of screen readers".

Please note that EPSO regularly reviews the online application form. As mentioned above, the "Candidate Portal" - once it can be implemented - will include both the application form and information form on special needs.

Once available, the Candidate Portal would also centralise all information regarding disability and special needs in one unique account so that candidates do not have to fill in a new request each time, and can apply with the same file as frequently as they wish. They would have the possibility to update their file whenever needed based on the evolution of their disability and special needs. They would have a full control of its content and use which would result in an increased autonomy.

2. In order to comply with the concept of 'reasonable accommodation' during the computer-based tests, EPSO should enable visually impaired candidates to access information independently, using assistive technologies, such as screen readers or braille displays on a standard computer.

EPSO fully shares the candidate's desires, and it is committed to find EPSO all possible solution to overcome the IT constraints as is will be explained more in detail hereafter.

For the purposes of the EO inquiry, EPSO is requested to reply to the following questions set out below in italics.

A. In July 2016, one of the complainants contacted EPSO to raise a number of accessibility issues that she had encountered when trying to fill out the online application form. She was informed that EPSO was in the process of replacing it with a new type of form that would accommodate accessibility requirements for the visually impaired. However, it seems that the online application form was still not fully accessible for users of screen readers in May 2017. Could EPSO provide an update on this procedure, and say when the new online application form will be launched? If this project has been delayed, could EPSO address these accessibility issues in the current version of the online application form?

EPSO is grateful to the European Ombudsman for the above questions because they allow to explain the following:

The Candidate Portal project is supplied by the Commission's Directorate-General for Informatics (DIGIT).

It was due to be rolled out already in 2017 already but unfortunately encountered several delays due to a number of conflicting priorities with other IT projects, technical constraints, and the complexity of the underlying data model, as well as potential IT governance weaknesses at corporate level.

In September 2017 it was agreed to put on hold all further development of the Candidate Portal, in order for DIGIT to be able to urgently develop a new data model to be able to support the new portal and all back office enhancements.

Furthermore, in order to help tackle IT governance weaknesses (as identified by the Internal Audit Service audit on the management of IT programmes and projects in the HR family at the end of 2017), as well as the accessibility issues underlined also by the European Ombudsman preparation for an external study was initiated at the end of 2017 to enable EPSO to assess the best possible way forward with finalising the development of the Candidate Portal and Talent Pool internally (with DIGIT) or outside (buy-in), or a combination of both.

Thus, unfortunately the implementation of the Candidate Portal is not fully under EPSO's control and, consequently, EPSO is not in the position to specify a specific date for its launch.

In the meantime, EPSO can only offer as alternative measures to visually impaired candidates a fully accessible and adapted format of the application form (Word format) and personal assistance.

"B. Both complainants contend that the online form for requesting accommodation for special needs is not fully accessible for users of screen readers. The complainants either needed to fill it out with the help of a sighted person or to contact EPSO for assistance to do so. Could EPSO update the online form to make it fully accessible for users of screen readers?"

Please note that in absence of Candidate Portal, EPSO is offering assistance and accessible formats of the application form as a transitional solution.

It is particularly difficult to make any changes to the current application form due to the IT constraints outlined above.

Nevertheless, EPSO is eager to emphasise that accessibility specifications are taken into account for new IT developments and EPSO is planning an external audit on accessibility once a solution is found regarding Candidate Portal.

"C. One of the complainants says that when she accessed the online form for requesting accommodation for special needs, it included the options of "screen reader" and "refreshable braille display". She stated that she selected these options. The other complainant says that he contacted EPSO and requested a screen reader. During the tests, they were both provided with braille transcripts and a sighted assistant. In view of the above, would EPSO please answer the following:

i) What specific "accommodation" options are offered to candidates on the online form or in their related contact with EPSO?"

Candidates can request a fully accessible and adapted format of the application form (Word format) and personal assistance.

Please note that candidates are asked what kind of adjustments they would like to have and what they are used to. Nevertheless EPSO acknowledges that some of assistive technology is not available at the CBT stage and, as this is the case, EPSO offers alternative measures to allow everyone to apply.

"ii) Are candidates sufficiently informed, when filling out the form or in other contacts with EPSO, that the “accommodation” measures actually provided may differ from the options selected?"

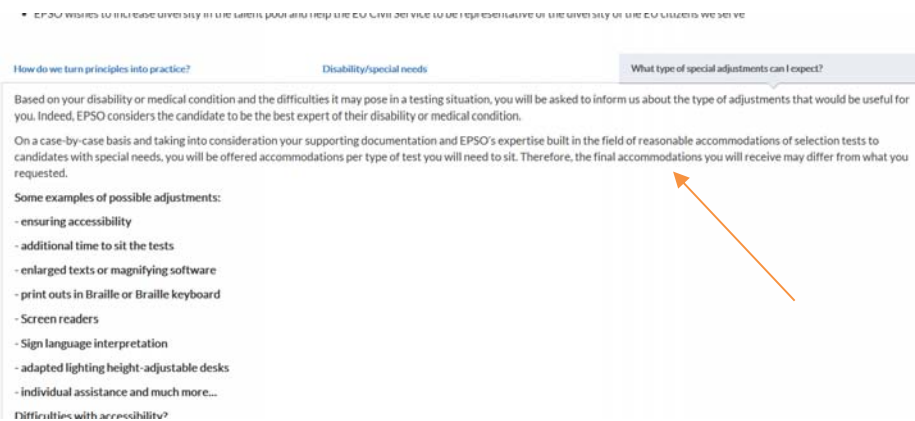
EPSO respectfully draws the European Ombudsman’s attention to the fact that this information is present in different media. In particular:

1. EPSO’s webpage dedicated to equal opportunities

See tab on how to request special adjustments https://epso.europa.eu/how-to-apply/equal-opportunities_en#tab-0-2 :

Based on your disability or medical condition and the difficulties it may pose in a testing situation, you will be asked to inform us about the type of adjustments that would be useful for you. Indeed, EPSO considers the candidate to be the best expert of their disability or medical condition.

On a case-by-case basis and taking into consideration your supporting documentation and EPSO’s expertise built in the field of reasonable accommodations of selection tests to candidates with special needs, you will be offered accommodations per type of test you will need to sit. Therefore, the final accommodations you will receive may differ from what you requested.



2. In the information form on special needs candidates need to fill in to request special adjustments

Reasonable accommodations and conditions required for tests

Depending on the type of tests, indicate what special accommodation(s) you would need due to your disability or permanent medical condition.

Tick the appropriate boxes and specify how these accommodation(s) could help reduce the limitations that your disability or your permanent medical condition may pose in a testing situation.

Please note that the final accommodations will be decided by the EPSO ACCESSIBILITY team and may differ somewhat from what you request.

In addition, in case this form is not fully accessible, candidates are offered the possibility to contact EPSO for an accessible format:

Accessibility problems?

** If you have difficulties accessing the form via assistive technologies for persons with disabilities, please contact epso-accessibility@ec.europa.eu to ask for an adapted format.*

How to contact us?

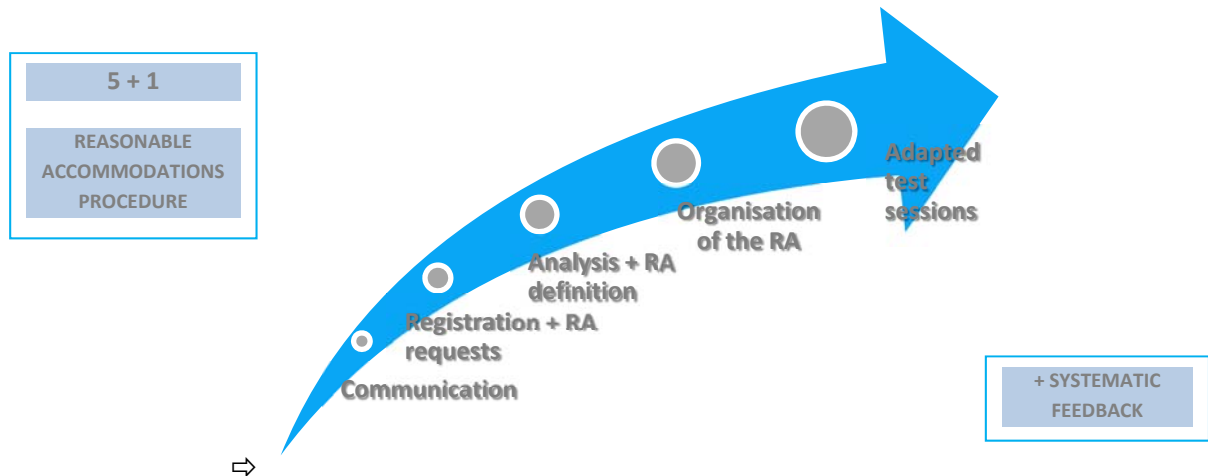
** By email at the following email address: EPSO-ACCESSIBILITY@ec.europa.eu
Or by fax to +32-2-299 80 81 (with subject title "EPSO ACCESSIBILITY")
Or by post to the following address :
European Personnel Selection Office
EPSO ACCESSIBILITY
C-25 - 1049 Brussels
Belgium*

3. Other documents

Furthermore, information on how to request special adjustments is present in the application form, in each notice of competition and in the general rules candidates need to read before they apply. In both, there is a paragraph on EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES and SPECIAL ADJUSTMENTS with links to EPSO's equal opportunities webpage where the equal opportunities policy is described (https://epso.europa.eu/how-to-apply/equal-opportunities_en#tab-0-0), together with practical information on disability/special needs (https://epso.europa.eu/how-to-apply/equal-opportunities_en#tab-0-1) and special adjustments (two separate dedicated tabs) including testimonies from colleagues with disabilities (https://epso.europa.eu/how-to-apply/equal-opportunities_en#tab-0-2).

"iii) Upon receipt of such requests, how does EPSO assess and determine the type of measure to be provided to candidates to accommodate their special needs during the tests? Is the choice of test centre by the candidate a determining factor for this?"

EPSO has developed a 5+1 step reasonable accommodations procedure in line with the best international standards and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The reasonable accommodations (RA) procedure is composed of the following steps:



In order to define reasonable accommodations, EPSO takes into account various key aspects:

1. Candidates' needs and requests: EPSO considers candidates with disabilities as best experts of their needs and they are the ones consulted first (they tell EPSO ACCESSIBILITY the type of special adjustments they would need (multiple adjustments possible) per type of test they need to sit - see attached information form on special needs).
2. Type of disability/illness/disorder and its symptomatology in the context of tests and staff selection (based on difficulties their specific situation can provoke in a specific test situation (per type of test, support used, answers expected), EPSO identifies the potential obstacles and removes them by ensuring special adjustments in order to allow candidates with special needs to fully demonstrate their competencies and compete on an equal basis as other candidates).
3. Supporting documents from experts (disability certificates, medical or specialists' reports...).
4. In-house expertise (EPSO has, overtime, acquired a certain expertise in defining and organising reasonable accommodations. The EPSO ACCESSIBILITY team is in place and in charge of these since 2008, and an expert in reasonable accommodations and equality & diversity management was hired at the end of 2013 in order to further professionalise and improve the processes and practices in place).
5. External expertise (in case there is a doubt or if EPSO ACCESSIBILITY is confronted with a brand new request, they consult experts (anonymous) for advice (regularly the medical service of the EU Commission is consulted) and best international practices (selection offices and experts from Belgium, Ireland and UK are regularly consulted).
6. Type of tests and supports (accommodations differ and are defined differently for PC, handwritten or oral tests).
7. Type of answers expected in each test (accommodations differ based on whether candidates are asked to speak, handwrite, tick the right answer on the keyboard or mouse...).

EPSO shares this information in a practical way with candidates - see EPSO's webpages dedicated to equal opportunities with practical information demystifying the process of special adjustments including illustrations of possible reasonable accommodations (https://epso.europa.eu/how-to-apply/equal-opportunities_en#tab-0-1, https://epso.europa.eu/how-to-apply/equal-opportunities_en#tab-0-2).

Finally, the choice of test centre by candidates is not a determining factor for accommodating their special needs.

In fact, all test centres must offer the same service and quality in order to ensure equal opportunities and treatment. They all offer the same level of accessibility. Prometric's staff is trained to facilitate special adjustments based on detailed instructions (on a case-by-case basis for each candidate) received from the EPSO ACCESSIBILITY team.

iv) Could EPSO say whether each of the “accommodation” measures (listed either on EPSO’s webpage and/or in the online form) is actually available and has been provided to candidates in at least some cases?

EPSO respectfully outlines that all measures listed on the website and in the information form on special needs are possible and have been requested and granted in the past at various stages of the selection process but not all measures are possible at all stages of the selection process. The list (already very detailed and long) is not exhaustive and can be completed/updated each time new types of requests are made.

*"D. In structuring the computer-based tests, how does EPSO understand the concept of 'reasonable accommodation' for persons with disabilities?
Has EPSO consulted organisations representing persons with disabilities on this issue?
Is EPSO willing to provide “accommodation” measures, such as assistive technologies, which would enable candidates with special needs to participate independently in the computer-based tests?"*

*When applying the concept of “reasonable accommodation”, EPSO identifies potential obstacles and removes barriers in order to fully allow candidates with disabilities and special needs to demonstrate their skills and compete on equal basis as other candidates.
EPSO is fully committed to provide accommodation measures enabling candidates with special needs to participate independently in the computer-based test. In this perspective, as already mentioned above, EPSO is researching a number of options to put in place an appropriate transitional solution. For the time being, it is only able to offer braille transcription of the tests and/or a sighted assistant.*

EPSO's expertise is based on more than 10 years of experience in the field of reasonable accommodations of selection tests and work place, consultations of various experts and organisations representing persons with disabilities from Belgium but also selection offices in Ireland, the United Kingdom and Belgium, and best international practices.

In fact, EPSO's goal is to ensure equal opportunities, treatment and access to all candidates at all times.

In the absence of the Candidate Portal and considering the technical obstacles that the system provider, DIGIT, is currently experiencing, EPSO is exploring all possible options to allow the use of assistive technologies across EU at the CBT stage. In the meantime, corrective measures are offered.

In order to allow candidates with visual impairments to apply and participate in competitions independently, EPSO continues to proactively collect feedback from candidates with special needs in order to improve its practices and services, including accessibility.

In this regard, EPSO kindly and respectfully draws the European Ombudsman's attention to the fact that 94.2 % of candidates with special needs are satisfied (satisfaction score 8,4/10) with the service and reasonable accommodations granted by EPSO ACCESSIBILITY team.

Finally, EPSO trusts that it has provided the Ombudsman with all the information she needs concerning her inquiry and looks forward to receiving her valuable comments in order to enhance its services and grant full accessibility to visually impaired candidates.
