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OVERVIEW OF CIVIL SERVICE SELECTION PROCEDURES IN EU CONTEXT

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1 Introduction

The European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO) is both pleased and honoured to contribute to this important Seminar on Civil Service recruitment procedures. It is particularly fitting that Lithuania, one of our newer Members States, is hosting the event and extending us this opportunity to share experiences and dialogue on the challenge of recruiting a new generation of civil servants.

The historical context of civil service selection procedures is worth a brief reflection. It is generally accepted that a key hallmark of every secure democracy is an impartial civil service, based on equality of access, with selection on merit, and recruitment through formal, fixed regulations. The term “civil service” was first used in India in the early 19th century, where the British administration introduced a system of competitive examinations to prevent corruption and favouritism. However the use of competitive examinations to select civil officials dates back much further, to Imperial China in fact. In 206 BC., the Han dynasty, introduced competitive examinations to select the best civil officials. These examinations were held in the Forbidden City, where these very examination rooms still stand today. In the Western world the development of the modern civil service and the selection of civil servants on merit came later and both developments are closely associated with the decline of feudalism. The 17th century saw Prussia establish a modern style civil administration staffed by civil servants chosen on a competitive basis. In France similar reforms preceded the French Revolution and were the basis for the Napoleonic reforms that transformed the royal service into the civil service. The United Kingdom adopted the term “civil service” and the system of selection by competitive examination in 1854.

Since the 19th century there has been a model of what an impartial civil service should look like across much of Western Europe:

- **Permanence** (in times of political change) as against constant “churning” - so that there is a continuity of experience
- **Neutrality** (non-political) as against political self-interest - so that there is the ability to speak truth to power rather than share its prejudices
- **Meritocracy** (at recruitment and during career) as against nepotism or bribery - so that there is a career open to talent.¹

These characteristics are dependant in the first instance on robust, independent selection procedures. The EU is made up of nine separate Institutions – Commission, Parliament, Council, Court of Justice, Court of Auditors, Economic and Social Committee, Committee of the Regions, the Ombudsman and the Data Protection Supervisor. In total the Institutions employ almost 39,000 staff, in what could best be described as an international civil service. For as long as the Institutions have existed their commitment to the principles of equality of access, with selection based on merit, using formal fixed regulations, has served them and the citizens of Europe well. These principles have enabled the Institutions to select well qualified staff exhibiting a high degree of professionalism and have guaranteed equal access to this international civil service for persons wishing to become officials, ensuring fair treatment for candidates.

The growth of the EU and consequent expansion of the Institutions dictated the need to co-ordinate recruitment activity in order to make efficient and economic use of resources. This led to the decision of the Institutions in 2002 to establish EPSO, which has been fully operational since 1st January 2003. For the first time, officials are being selected by a single body and candidates now have a single, central contact point which makes access to information simpler and more transparent.

The duties of EPSO, as decided by the Secretaries General of the Institutions, are to organise open competitions with a view to securing the services of officials on optimal professional and

¹ Michael Duggett, *The Contribution of a Professional Civil Service to Democracy*, 2003.

financial terms for the Institutions of the EU. EPSO draws up reserve lists of successful candidates enabling the Institutions to recruit highly qualified staff to meet their needs. In carrying out its remit EPSO must

- (1) cooperate closely with the institutions with a view to assessing the future staff needs indicated by the institutions and preparing and implementing a programme of competitions to meet those needs in a timely manner;
- (2) develop selection methods and techniques on the basis of best practice and in line with the skills profiles laid down for the various categories of staff of the institutions;
- (3) administer and check the use of the reserve lists established on the basis of interinstitutional competitions;
- (4) submit annual reports to the institutions on its activities.

Given this wide and challenging remit, the main body of this paper will address the unique features and challenges faced by EPSO in recruiting for an international civil service, and how EPSO is responding to these challenges. In addition the paper will explore briefly the wider recruitment context, including the global economy and the impact of the internet on recruitment. The paper will offer a brief overview of selection procedures in Member States and conclude with a look to the future.

2. The Wider Recruitment Context

We are living through a period of major technological change, brought about by the development and the widening application of information and communication technologies (ICTs). This process is both different from, and faster than, anything we have seen before. At the same time we are living through the unprecedented phenomenon of a global economy. Globalization is defined as a process of growing interdependence between all people of this planet. People are linked together economically and socially by trade, investments and governance. These links are spurred by market liberalisation and the afore-mentioned ICT's. Globalisation and the growth of ICT's are the driving forces for fundamental organisational and operational changes in employment, and the EU and national governments of Member States, no less than commercial organisations, must plan for and react to the pressure of these changes.

Additional challenges for those in the profession of selection are posed by the changing expectations of job-seekers. Traditionally the national/international civil service sector has placed a strong focus on selection of graduate entrants with a combination of good intellectual abilities and a range of transferable skills and qualities - the "generalist". This approach is coming under increasing pressure to keep pace with changes in employment, and a growing global entrepreneurial culture, both of which are driving increased mobility among job-seekers. Trends suggest that graduates and indeed workers generally are prepared to move jobs regularly and/or change career direction in order to improve their prospects and earning potential. The concept of one job for life does not always hold appeal for today's job-seeker. These challenges are leading some to question whether the era of the "generalist" is coming to an end.

The Internet is having a major impact on the way in which selection is carried out in many Member States, which is increasingly being felt in terms of changes in selection practice. The Internet as a selection medium has enabled the widespread adoption of computer-based assessment and is predicted to replace pen and paper as the default medium before very long. It does raise a range of issues including security, confidentiality, authentication, control of assessment conditions, control over practice and equality of access (although this is less of an issue given the growth in internet use across all sectors of population). What is needed as this medium evolves is the development of international standards to protect the rights and interests of test takers, test users and test providers.

3. Overview of Selection Procedures in Member States

Selection procedures in the civil service systems of EU Member States are distinguished by whether they are career or job based systems. In all cases they attempt to combine two key

principles of (i) the right to equal access of every qualified citizen to the civil service and (ii) recruiting the best available candidates for the civil service. In some cases both principles are required by the constitution of the country, however the balance between both principles varies somewhat with some leaning more towards one principle than the other. In Member States more influenced by the classical French concept of public administration (Spain, Portugal, Italy, and France) the focus tends more towards the equal access principle, whereas in other Member States (Netherlands, the Nordic countries) the focus favours merit based selection.

EPSO has compiled information on the principal characteristics of civil service selection procedures in each Member States, through the Network of Personnel Selection Experts from all Member States of the EU, which it created. Briefly summarised this indicates:-

Types of civil service

Member States with career based systems (AT, BE, DE, ES, EL, FR, IE, LU, PT) offer a career until retirement, with security of tenure on a statutory basis. Open competition is the selection method most frequently used, although the career-based system does not require recruitment to be solely by competition. In Member States with job-based systems (CZ, DK, EE, FI, HU, SE, SK, UK), employment is contract based. Pre-selection is based on documents supplied by candidates (curriculum vitae, motivation letter, diplomas, references, etc.) followed by a recruitment interview based on competence, skills and professional experience. Other Member States (IT, LT, NL, SI) use a “hybrid” of career and job-based system.

Centralised/Decentralised

In most Member States (AT, DE, DK, EE, FI, IT, PT, CZ, HU, LT, LV, NL, SE, SI, UK) the system is decentralised, ministries having their own particular procedures. Where the system is centralised it is within a ministry (ES, FR), or an independent Office/ Commission/ ional Committee (IE,MT,PL,SK,BE,CY,EL,) while in Luxembourg recruitment is either centralised within the Civil Service Ministry or decentralised within the various administrations, depending on the nature of the post.

Minimum conditions for recruitment

Most Member States require a clean criminal record. A nationality requirement does not always apply in the case of EU citizens, however for some posts it remains a requirement. A university degree is generally required for access to the highest category of civil servant. The general trend is to abolish age limits, in compliance with equality obligations, however some Member States (AT, FR, LU, DE, NL LT) have yet to repeal them. In general the minimum recruitment age is 18 years, however it is 15 years in Slovenia and Finland. Mastery of the official language(s) of the Member State is a legal obligation in some Member States (AT, BE, FI, LU, NL).

Selection criteria

Transparency means that information on vacancies in civil services is accessible to all citizens and, in general, job vacancies must be published at least in the official journal. In addition they are advertised in the recruitment section of national newspapers and disseminated via the national employment agency. In France, a provisional timetable of competitions planned for the following year is published in December. A number of Member States also use official web-sites to publicise vacancies. The principle of equal opportunity applies in all Member States. Member States adopt different positions in applying the principle of equal treatment for all candidates. Some Member States (SE, AT) use incentives to increase the number of women in management grades, while others (BE, UK) make special arrangements to give the best possible access to disabled and (UK) ethnic minorities. The use of on-line registration coexists with paper based registration in some Member States (BE, EI, FR, ES). Similarly the right of access to documents relating to the selection procedure varies according to the country.

Nature of the tests

Competitive selection has a number of stages in all Member States.

In some Member States (EE, LI, SV) it commences with a pre-selection stage, based on examination of documents supplied by the candidates (curriculum vitae, motivation letter, diplomas, references) while Germany uses computerised pre-selection for diplomats.

Open competition is used in all Member States. This generally comprises both written and oral tests. Written tests are normally the first stage of selection and these vary depending on the level of the post being filled. Computer-aided tests are used in some Member States (BE, LU, DE, EI, UK) and these include ability, personality, reasoning and aptitude tests and simulation exercises. Written tests are used to reduce the overall number of candidates and only those candidates who reach the agreed standard in the written tests proceed to the next stage.

The final stage is usually the oral test or interview. The oral test is used to assess suitability to undertake the duties of the post being filled. In certain countries (AT, BE, DE, LU, PT, SK) psychological tests or assessments are used and/or individual interviews with psychologists.

Where a recruitment interview is the sole selection mechanism it mainly covers a candidates' professional experience and reasons for applying for the job.

Selection Board

Selection Boards are appointed to oversee part or all of the selection process. They generally comprise officials of a grade higher than or at least equal to that of the vacancy. In Hungary psychologists form part of the boards.

4. Selection Process in EPSO

Prior to 2002, each Institution was responsible for its own selection competitions and for recruitment of staff, requiring candidates to enter a separate selection competition for each Institution. Successful candidates could, in principle, only be recruited to the Institution for which that competition was valid. EPSO was established with the aim of harmonising and rationalising the selection process, introducing greater professionalism into selection procedures and making more efficient and economic use of resources by generating economies of scale. As of 1 January 2003, EPSO took over from the Institutions the responsibility of selecting officials while the mandate of recruitment still rests with each individual institution.

What makes EPSO unique among selection organisations is the scale and complexity of its operations. The Institutions serve in excess of 450 million EU citizens (this will shortly increase by a further 30 million) and operate in 20 official working languages (the number is also due to increase shortly). EPSO must not only ensure it meets the needs of each Institution for officials, it must also endeavour to ensure a geographic balance in its selection, both from across all Member States and from within Member States. In catering for 20 official working languages EPSO must ensure that it selects sufficient numbers of linguists to fully cater for the translation and interpretation needs of each Institution.

In terms of scale, EPSO currently has 42 competitions ongoing, which have in total attracted almost 114,000 candidates, from which it will select 5,658 laureats. Since its establishment EPSO has finalised over 150 competitions and selected in excess of 7,600 laureats on behalf of all the Institutions. EPSO currently operates with 132 staff members, divided into six Units, and is operationally headed by a Director. EPSO's budget for 2006 is €22 million.

Governance

The highest decision-making body of EPSO is its Management Board. As an inter-Institutional office, the Board consists of one representative from each Institution, currently the Secretary-General or equivalent, and three staff representatives with observer status. Among its duties, the Management Board approves rules governing the running of EPSO and its organisational

structure. It also approves the principles governing selection policy as well as the annual work programme.²

Consultation Process

The annual work programme is prepared in the first instance by an inter-Institutional Working Group of officials, nominated by each Institution to represent its recruitment needs. This Group agrees the annual schedule for the programme of competitions and reports to COPARCO, a joint committee common to the Institutions, which has the final right of advice on all competitions. Once COPARCO has issued an opinion on a competition, the Director of EPSO, as the appointing authority, adopts the wording of the notice of open competition to be published in the Official Journal and advertised within the European Institutions.

Competition Format

EPSO carries out its core mission of organising open competitions by publishing for each competition a notice of competition which defines the purpose of the competition and sets out relevant arrangements. The notice of competition constitutes the "law" for the competition and must include:

- the nature of the competition;
- the kind of competition (on the basis of either qualifications or tests, or of both qualifications and tests);
- the type of duties and tasks involved in the posts to be filled as well as the function group and grade offered;
- the diplomas and other evidence of formal qualifications or the previous professional experience required for the posts to be filled;
- in the case of competitions based on tests, the nature of the tests (multiple-choice pre-selection tests, written, practical and oral tests) and the marks to be allocated to each;
- where applicable, the knowledge of languages required in view of the specific nature of the jobs to be filled;
- the maximum number of candidates who may be invited to participate in the different stages of the competition;
- the number of successful candidates, to be listed in alphabetical order and/or by merit group;
- the closing date for applications.

General admission criteria

All applicants must have citizenship of an EU Member State, have full rights as a citizen, meet character requirements and have fulfilled any obligations imposed on them by the laws on military service.

Specific admission criteria

Applicants must fulfil the specific criteria set out in the notice of competition for specific job to be filled in relation to educational qualifications and/or professional experience and satisfy specific language conditions, increasingly a perfect knowledge of at least one EU working language and a very sound knowledge of two other EU working languages. In the case of competitions for linguists more competence in languages is required.

² Decision of the Secretaries-General of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission, the Registrar of the Court of Justice, the Secretaries-General of the Court of Auditors, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, and the representative of the Ombudsman on the organisation and operation of the European Personnel Selection Office, (2002/621/CE), Official Journal of the European Communities 26 July 2002.

Selection procedures

The practical organisation of the competition is entirely a matter for EPSO. Where tests are used EPSO decides whether or not the tests and examinations are to be held simultaneously, organises the date and place of the tests, arranges for the test papers to be translated and printed, for invigilation during competitions and for assistance with marking (by means of optical scanning in the case of the tests).

In general the first stage of a selection process is the preliminary selection tests for admission to the competition. These must be taken in language different to the candidates first language and normally consist of multiple choice questions to assess:

- knowledge of the EU, its Institutions and its policies;
- general ability, usually verbal and numerical reasoning skill.

The second stage is the comprehensive written test in the particular skill areas specified as necessary to perform the duties of the post and set out in the notice of competition. Only candidates who succeed in the preliminary selection tests are invited to undertake the written test. If the preliminary and written stages have been taken together only the written tests of candidates who succeed in the preliminary tests are assessed.

The final stage of selection consists of an oral examination to complete the assessment of the candidate's suitability to carry out the duties set out in the notice of competition.

At each individual stage of selection the "cascade system" determines success, in effect only the highest scoring candidates proceed to the next round of selection. Candidates who have succeeded in the tests and examinations are eligible for inclusion on the reserve list subject to the maximum laid down in the notice of competition.

Selection Board

A Selection Board is appointed for each competition. EPSO is the appointing authority for the Selection Board, while the members are designated by the administrations of the

Institutions, and by the staff committees. The Selection Board is composed of an uneven number of members, who act as a collegiate body in overseeing and implementing the selection procedures, under the guidance of a Chairman and within the framework defined by the notice of competition. If a Selection Board consists of more than four members, it must comprise at least two members of each gender. EPSO is also responsible for proposing a sufficient number of persons to enable the selection board to appoint assessors/markers for written examinations, and for organising oral tests (scheduling and arranging for interpreters to be present if necessary).

If a competition covers a number of different areas, EPSO may nominate a Selection Board for each. The Selection Board is bound by the notice of competition as published and must exercise its powers of discretion within the legal framework set out in that notice. However the Selection Board has wide powers of discretion particularly in relation to the content of tests, as it is responsible for selecting the tests used in the competition. The composition of each Selection Board is published in the Official Journal or on the EPSO website before the date of the tests.

EPSO provides Selection Boards with administrative, logistical, data-processing and where necessary, legal support. EPSO also organises training and information for Selection Board members, including guidance in connection with candidates' degrees.

Diplomas and levels of training and professional experience. For each competition, EPSO designates a coordinator and a secretariat to assist the Selection Board in all its work. Correspondence with candidates is almost exclusively electronic and is handled by EPSO on behalf of the Selection Board at every stage of the competition.

At the end of the competition, the Selection Board transmits the records, its report and the list of successful candidates to EPSO, which then informs candidates of the results and transmits the list of successful candidates to the various Institutions for their recruitment needs.

Procedures for challenging decisions

The notice of competition also sets out the types of procedures through which the results of a competition may be challenged.

Requests for review

These must be submitted to EPSO, where they are examined and, where appropriate, transferred to the Chairman of the Selection Board if it is a matter coming within the remit of the Board. The response is sent to the candidate as soon as possible (fifteen working days according to the code of good practice).

Appeals

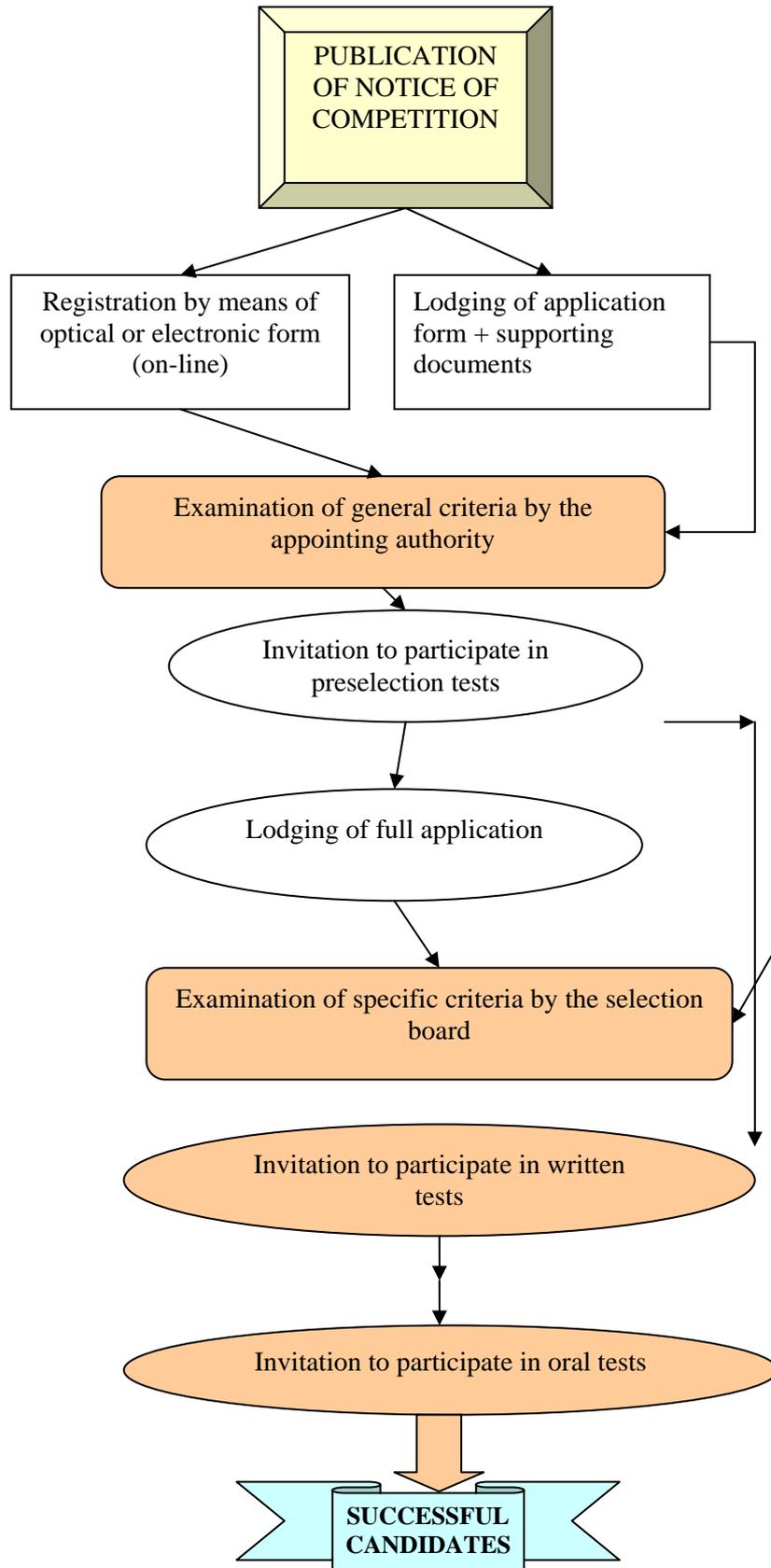
These can take the form of a complaint under Article 90(2) of the Staff Regulations (to which EPSO must respond) or an appeal to the Civil Service Tribunal (where the legality of the decision is scrutinised).

Complaint to the European Ombudsman

The European Ombudsman was established by the Maastricht Treaty to deal with complaints about maladministration by the Institutions and bodies of the EU, (maladministration is deemed to have occurred when a public body fails to act in accordance with a rule or principle which binds it). In carrying out his investigations the Ombudsman cannot annul or amend a decision adversely affecting a candidate. However if he finds maladministration has occurred he requests the Institution concerned to take appropriate action. If the Institution does not take the recommended action the Ombudsman can make a special Report to the European Parliament

5. Candidate Perspective

The recruitment process from the candidate's perspective is set out overleaf in diagram format.



6. Developments and Initiatives by EPSO

International benchmarking and exchange of best practice

EPSO is obliged by the Decision of the Secretaries-General on the organisation and operation of the office, to “develop selection methods and techniques on the basis of best practice”³. An agreement between the institutions on *inter-alia* common principles for a shared selection and recruitment policy further lays down that “constant attention shall be paid to best practices and to developments in recruitment techniques”⁴. Attention to “best practice” underpins all EPSO selection activity and drives new and ongoing initiatives in selection policy.

In the autumn of 2003, EPSO initiated the establishment of a network of selection experts from all current 25 Member States. Following bilateral meetings between EPSO staff and representatives from 10 national central administrations during late 2003/early 2004, EPSO was satisfied that there was a sufficient level of interest to proceed with such a network. In June 2004 the first meeting of selection experts took place in Brussels attended by 35 experts from 23 Member States, together with staff of EPSO. The network was formally established at this meeting. A second plenary meeting, organised by EPSO, was held in June 2005, also in Brussels, and was attended by 37 experts from 24 member states. The two themes on the agenda - the use of electronic selection instruments and equal opportunities generated much debate with presentations by EPSO and four member states⁵.

EPSO is continuing its bilateral meetings with Member States, between network meetings, to learn more about their selection systems. The network also provides contact points around the EU to which EPSO can address specific questions and generally exchange information and experience. The benefit of these contact points is evident from the bilateral contacts by EPSO in its preparation for Computer Based Testing (CBT). Selor⁶, the Belgian federal office for selection of personnel, shared their experiences from a technical as well as policy point of view with EPSO. Further exchanges of best practices and experiences in the field of CBT took place with the British Cabinet Office, which has wide experience with CBT over a period of time. Members of the network have helped identify where there is common ground for further discussions in particular fields.

Assessment centres

In 2004 EPSO launched a new initiative in its competition for management grades from the 10 new Member States with the introduction of assessment centres for all candidates admitted to the oral exams. The objective was to obtain a reliable indication of the management abilities and future potential of candidates. The assessment centre included:

- A written exercise in which candidates had to process documents;
- An exercise to assess management ability; and
- A competency-based interview by a human resources expert.

³ Article 2 (c) in the Decision of the Secretaries-General of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission, the Registrar of the Court of Justice, the Secretaries-General of the Court of Auditors, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, and the representative of the Ombudsman on the organisation and operation of the European Personnel Selection Office, (2002/621/CE) Official Journal of the European Communities 26 July 2002.

⁴ Section 1.4 in the Agreement between the Secretaries-General of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission, the Registrar of the Court of Justice, the Secretaries-General of the Court of Auditors, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, and the representative of the Ombudsman on the common principles for a shared selection and recruitment policy and the principles for managing reserve lists. 26 July 2002.

⁵ BE, DK, F and SK.

⁶ Bureau de sélection de l'administration fédérale.

The centres were run by an external consultant, selected through an open call for tender. The competency profile for management grades, defined by the European Commission, covered the following areas:

- Information management (integrating);
- Task management (managing the organisation / steering);
- People management (motivating / guiding people);
- Interpersonal management (influencing); and
- Personal management (coping).

Assessment centres will continue to be part of the selection process for Management grade competitions.

Monitoring and Evaluation

In addition to EPSO's well established equal opportunities policy, EPSO continuously monitors the gender distribution and the geographical balance in different stages of all competitions. Statistical analyses concerning male/female results in different tests are carried out routinely to detect any potential gender bias in the test material. The analyses form the basis for continuous improvement in line with best practice. For instance the percentage of female candidates for the A-competitions increased from 46 per cent (with 25 per cent successful) in 1994, to 48 per cent (with 35 per cent successful) in 1998. In the first wave of enlargement competitions 50 per cent of successful candidates in the A grade competitions⁷ were women - a unique gender equilibrium in A grade competitions.

In addition EPSO is currently putting in place an internal evaluation function. The role of the evaluators will be, on the one hand, to ensure a systematic and thorough ex-post assessment of completed competitions, and on the other hand to develop a set of performance indicators which could be applied to future competitions.

It is also the policy of EPSO to routinely survey non-attendees at all pre-selection tests. The reasons for non-attendance are evaluated for every competition and amalgamated to produce regular Reports to the Management Board of EPSO. The findings and recommendations from these surveys are used to inform policy developments and to improve EPSO's services.

Electronic selection

On-line application – EPSO's on-line system was designed in-house and introduced in May 2003. In addition to accepting applications on-line, the system facilitates EPSO conducting all communication with candidates electronically. This is done through a type of functional mailbox (EPSO profile) being created for each individual candidate upon registration, which has both modernised working methods and introduced significant efficiencies to administrative procedures. Ongoing improvements to the system have made the process more effective and user-friendly. Candidates' personal data can now be modified via direct input by the individual, although key data is protected. Candidates are also invited to submit electronic CVs online when invited to oral tests. Mail alerts are used to communicate new information or updates relating to a competition. Registration has been simplified to reduce the overload on the system in the final days before the closure date for each competition. Candidates now confirm their attendance in a second registration phase, when the dates of pre-selection tests are known. In addition, candidates can choose their preferred test centre. These improvements have helped reduce the problem of spurious registrations as well as making the system more accessible to candidates and minimising administrative tasks.

Computer Based Testing

Having proved the benefits of e-based technology in large-scale recruitment and selection with on-line registration, the next step in modernising the selection process was computerised delivery of the tests themselves. EPSO's successful launch of Computer Based Testing (CBT) in late 2005

⁷ EPSO/A/1-10/03, assistant administrators grade A8.

enables candidates to contact a test centre, make an appointment and sit their pre-selection tests at a time of their choosing. The test centres are purpose-designed and fully equipped with modern IT equipment. Completed test results are immediately transmitted electronically to EPSO. The system allows EPSO to monitor and augment its database of questions on a continuous basis.

CBT marks a major achievement in electronic service delivery and EPSO is planning more extensive use of CBT across a range of competitions in 2006. While initially CBT will be used for pre-selection tests only, it offers enormous potential to streamline selection procedures, improve service delivery, improve resource efficiency and reduce costs. Continuous advances in information technology, particularly in electronic selection techniques, will be actively pursued by EPSO in its open competitions. The aim is to achieve a recruitment process, based on self service, which is more user-friendly to the applicant and more responsive to the needs of the Institutions.

7. Looking to the Future

There can be no doubt that approaches to selection are changing and that the pace of that change will challenge everyone involved in this critically important business. Yet the need to preserve the core value of competitive selection based on equality of access and selection on merit has never been greater. We must continue to forge strong links between the EU and its Member States national civil service systems and we must continue to share and learn from each others experience as we face the challenges ahead.

For EPSO the future priority is to continue to develop its people, skills and technologies, and to grow as a centre of best practice in selection. EPSO is justifiably proud of the role it plays in meeting the needs of the Institutions in a continually expanding EU, and thereby indirectly serving all the citizens of the EU.