

NOTE TO THE ATTENTION OF
Ms G. INGESTAD - DIRECTOR GENERAL FOR HUMAN RESOURCES AND SECURITY

Subject: Internal Competitions 2022/2023: How can we improve?

Dear Ms Ingestad,

R&D Ispra is receiving numerous feedbacks regarding some of the ongoing Internal Competitions (AD6 / AST2 / AST SC2). We thought it could be useful to gather the most valuable comments in which we share some considerations on the way the competitions were organised and run, as well as their content and structure.

While being aware of the difficulties of organising a fair selection process, the elements reported below support some doubts on the competencies and knowledge looked for when selecting the future permanent staff of the European Commission.

The purpose of these considerations is the improvement of selection procedures for future competitions. Specific considerations on the MCQ test, the written test, and the technical setting follow.

On the MCQ test:

- The MCQ test mainly assessed purely mnemonic (or trivial) knowledge on EU policies, rather than testing meaningful knowledge on policies, as well as EU institutions and their functioning; To be more specific, many of the questions and options for answers tested knowledge of specific notions and figures that can hardly be considered relevant or meaningful regarding the duties of a permanent official. To give some examples: candidates needed to be familiar with the figures of National natural gas dependence from Russia in 2020; the meaning of the acronym of the SURE instrument; the number of projects under LIFE Programme; the conditions for reimbursement of a bus ticket in the EU; how the n-th item of the UN Sustainable Development Goals is called (are UN topics EU knowledge, by the way?); this year's school drop-out rates in Europe compared to last year; what chapter 5 of the MFF is.
- In the Notice of Competition, no details were provided on the macro-areas and topics that would be included in the MCQ test nor sources were specified to enable the candidates to study. This leads one to wonder what are the skills and knowledge the organisers of the competition are looking for, other than the memorizing random facts about the EU.
- Furthermore, questions that are not directly related to EU policies and institutions should be avoided, considering the vastness of the sources already to be consulted for the preparation of this test.

The MCQ test seemed to be designed with the sole purpose of eliminating candidates (in a more or less random manner) rather than selecting the most suitable ones.

Considering the questions asked, the knowledge assessed and the lack of any indication on what to study, any preparation turned out to be useless for success in this test.

On the Written Test:

- The test was purposefully confusing. To make an example, in some cases, the assignment instructions were not consistent with the email from the Head of Unit, a key document in these kind of tasks. Therefore, candidates made different choices on which instruction to follow. As in the Notice of Competition and in the written assignment, there were no indications on the correct way to address inconsistent instructions, this results in a lack of transparency of the marking process and a possibly arbitrary treatment of candidates.
- The Notice of Competition did not specify any criteria of selection and marking, also being vague on the competencies tested in the written assignment.
- While drafting the written assignment it was impossible to get a whole view of the written test (square too small compared to the screen). Moreover, swiping from the left to right screen or vice versa caused a technical problem. This was rather disturbing as well as creating additional stress. It would be easier to use the same features/environment as the Case Study (EPSO competitions), which is more user friendly. The provided basic tool was not suitable to complete some requested assignments (e.g. prepare slides for a meeting).

On the technical setting:

- The choice of not testing in dedicated spaces hinders the equality among candidates with different living and family conditions.
- The exam platform was completely automatized. There was no human presence to support the candidates in case of need, leaving no space for technical mistakes or malfunctions. This led to unnecessary uncertainties on the technical conformity, particularly during the proctoring phase, and put the responsibility for the technical environment of the exam solely on the candidate.
- In the instructions of the test, it was clearly mentioned that candidates were prohibited e.g., to talk (including to oneself), cover their face or mouth, turn the head or take notes on paper. Understanding that these rules aim to prevent extreme cases of misconduct, moving the lips while reading out loud to oneself or natural gestures (like rubbing one's face) are not signs of misconduct. These requirements are unnatural and unduly restrictive for a 3-hour exam and frame natural human behaviour as misconduct, thereby contributing to set an alienating environment.

The natural goal of an internal competition should be that the best non-permanent staff are offered a chance of stabilization, whereas "best" should obviously mean those having provably made the most striking contributions to the Institution's activities and having grown into their roles in a way such that they have become key to the success of the Institution's activities.

However, the design of the present internal competitions doesn't entail any kind of evaluation of the job performed by the candidates during their years in the Institution. Nowhere in the Notice of Competition is it mentioned that the candidates' performances while in the Institution will be reviewed or assessed.

For sure, this hasn't happened up to this point (MCQ + written test), and it is not clear if the concrete experience and contribution in the Institution will be part of the oral test and if it will be assessed at all.

We are confident that all above considerations will lead to a better design of future Internal Competitions, crucial for the recruitment of the "best" permanent staff of the European Institutions and in order to respect the efforts of the candidates who participate in them.

Yours Sincerely,

Gianfranco Selvagio
President, R&D Ispra
(signed)

Salvatore Tirendi
Vice-President, R&D Ispra
(signed)

Cc. Ms Sabine HENZLER