



IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL BLOCKING FACTORS TO EU CAREERS – RACE AND ETHNICITY

EPSO's FOCUS GROUP PROJECT



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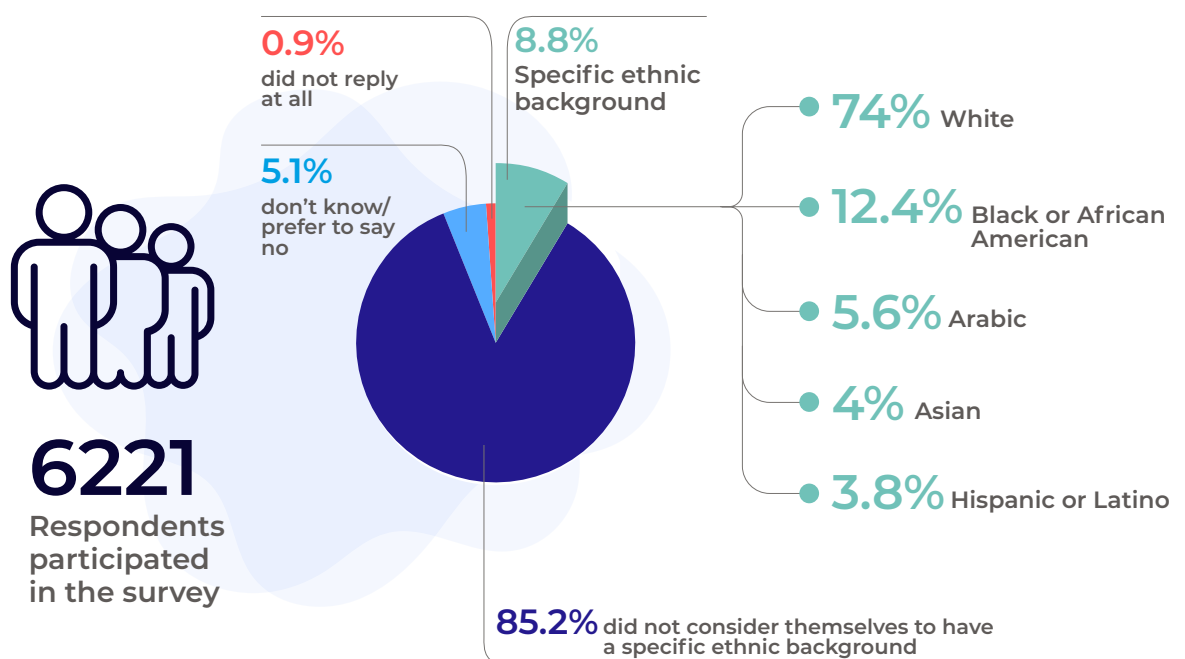
EPSO's FOCUS GROUP PROJECT

"I don't necessarily ask myself if I belong, I mainly wonder, why it's so hard to find an entry point? Why isn't it straightforward? I'm surrounded by many young professionals with the right credentials who ask themselves the same question".

I. Introduction

How was the project born?

In early 2021, the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO) decided to ask 33.810 former candidates if they considered themselves to be from a specific ethnic group, as part of a more [comprehensive pilot survey](#) launched for the first time by our Office. The survey aimed to understand the makeup of our pool of candidates. Among the 6.221 respondents, only 8.8% considered themselves to have a specific ethnic background (85.2% did not; 5.1% answered 'I don't know/I prefer not to say', and 0.9% did not reply at all). Among the 8.8% who self-identified as having a specific ethnic background, 74% identified as being White, 12.4% as Black or African American, 5.6% as Arabic, 4% as Asian and 3.8% as Hispanic or Latino.



For many years, EPSO has been consistent in applying its [equality and diversity](#) policies, and in ensuring non-discrimination in its competitions and selection procedures, but race and ethnicity had never been looked at specifically. Thanks to the results of our diversity pilot survey, and in the framework of the [European Union \(EU\) Anti-Racism Action Plan](#), EPSO decided to look more specifically at race and ethnicity, as regards the pool of talent that applies to EPSO's selection procedures in general.

Anecdotal contacts with former and current EPSO candidates and EU trainees, as well as with [EU Careers Student Ambassadors](#), and [civil society organisations working in the field of diversity and inclusion](#) part of EPSO's dedicated database, had led us to realise that many potential candidates from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups perceived several blocking factors when planning to apply to EPSO selection procedures.

When exploring this further we asked ourselves the following core question: What could be preventing people who identify as part of a racial or ethnic minority, from applying to EPSO selection procedures?

This question matters because the EU institutions that EPSO works for are interested in increasing the diversity of their own staff and, naturally, that process starts at the selection stage. This wish stems not only from the need to have staff representative of the societies served by the EU civil service, but also from the need to create teams capable of responding adequately and creatively to the increasingly complex matters managed by the EU institutions.

In view of the above, and in line with EPSO's 2022-2024 Equality & Diversity Action Plan, EPSO's Outreach & External Relations unit conducted a 'focus group project'.





II. Methodology

The focus group methodology is a social sciences' technique used to collect data through group interaction. A small representative group of people (6-8 people) is selected and brought together for qualitative research purposes to participate in an organised discussion around an issue or topic of which they have personal experience with, under the guidance of a moderator¹.

In total, five focus group sessions were organised by EPSO between April 2023 and October 2023, allowing EPSO to learn from over thirty people from under-represented racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The following questions guided the discussions focusing on race and ethnicity:

- Why are candidates from racial and ethnic minorities not applying to EPSO's competitions in bigger numbers?
- What could be the potential blocking factors preventing them from applying to EU Careers and EPSO selection procedures?

We also aimed to take note of practical solutions. For that reason, EPSO also asked the following questions to the participants:

- What could be the practical solutions to remove these obstacles and encourage as many candidates as possible to apply to and join EU Careers?
- What could EPSO, and the EU Institutions, do to increase the 'diversity capital' of the EU civil service?

The sessions were also an opportunity for EPSO to clarify misinformation about the EU civil service and the career opportunities on offer.

Each participant was invited to reflect on the questions first individually and then as part of a group. They were also invited to take into consideration intersectionality². Those who did not wish to bring forward their opinion during the session and/or wanted to reflect further, were offered the possibility to send their contributions in writing at a later stage.

¹ Dictionary of psychology (3rd edition), A.M. Colman, Oxford University Press, 2008.

² "Intersectionality, in social theory, the interaction and cumulative effects of multiple forms of discrimination affecting the daily lives of individuals, particularly women of colour. The term also refers more broadly to an intellectual framework for understanding how various aspects of individual identity—including race, gender, social class, and sexuality—interact to create unique experiences of privilege or oppression." in [Intersectionality | Definition, Kimberle Crenshaw, History, Applications, Criticism, & Facts | Britannica](#)

Sample

Three organisations participated in EPSO's 'focus group project'³. We thought it would be interesting to invite participants from both external and internal⁴ diversity organisations⁵.

[Diversité Europe](#) is an interinstitutional staff association representing EU staff who identify as having a racial or ethnic minority background, and their allies. It aims to help the EU institutions fulfil the commitments they made to diverse workplaces and inclusive societies. Diversité Europe aims to raise awareness of ethnic and racial diversity and promote the inclusion of all staff in all categories and at all career levels within the EU institutions and bodies.

[ERGO](#), the European Roma Grassroot Organisations Network, mobilises and connects grassroots, national and international organisations, and individuals to combat 'antigypsyism' and Roma poverty; strengthen Roma civil society participation in decision-making at all levels and commit governments and European institutions to effective social inclusion and anti-discrimination policies, standards, and funds for Roma.

[Keep Dreaming](#) is a non-profit association working for the personal development and professional advancement of students, professionals, and entrepreneurs by establishing collaborations with structures committed to racial equity and ethnic diversity. They provide education, advice and operational assistance to individuals, companies, and other organisations in the fight against discrimination and 'ethno-stratification'.



³ Initially, the European Network Against Racism (ENAR), was one of the key participating organisations. Unfortunately, despite multiple attempts, ENAR cancelled their participation one day before their scheduled session and rescheduling did not prove possible.

⁴ In this case, 'internal' refers to organisations representing EU staff.

⁵ EPSO was not involved in the preselection of the actual participants. The organisations chose their own representatives.



Main observations

Lack of information and opacity of the process

"Regarding the obstacles to apply, one key thing I face, as many others, is the lack of information or rather difficulties navigating information on the different pathways to an EU career (AD5, CAST, temporary agents, etc.)."

"The opacity of the process is clearly one of the biggest obstacles I can think of!"

The lack of information about EU Careers and how to join the EU civil service was identified by most participants as being one of the biggest obstacles preventing racial and ethnic minorities from applying to EU Careers. This was the case for all focus groups.

EU institutions' expectations seen as too demanding

"To enter the EU, you must speak at least three languages, if not more ...".

"You only want candidates from elite universities. I don't come from the College of Europe! Why does it even matter!?"

"There is excess value put on international experience. If you are part of the Roma community, and live in a small village, with hardly any access to education, how can you even apply, and even compete on an equal basis?"

Many participants felt that the EU institutions have too elevated expectations when it comes to the skills, competencies, and qualifications of their staff members, including trainees. They felt that the eligibility and selection criteria are too demanding. They thought that candidates needed to be "overqualified", with more than one university diploma, ideally from a prestigious university, such as the College of Europe. Some participants qualified this as "jetsetism" and elitism" and a form of socio-economic segregation.

Representatives from the Roma community underscored the precarious situation of most Roma people, which prevents families from sending their children to study abroad (or even to their capital cities) and even less so to prestigious, and often expensive, universities. They also questioned the fact that Romani is not recognised as one of the EU's official languages which reduced even more their community's chances of applying to EU Careers.

Perceived privilege: insider versus outsider status

"I have no family members or even friends working for the institutions to get me a job there!"

"People who are already working in the institutions have a clear advantage compared to us who have never had any experience there. They know how the institutions work from the inside. You cannot compete with that!"

Another important perception shared by many participants referred to the privileged status of insiders (or 'internal candidates'⁶) compared to that of outsiders. In other words, participants felt that clear preference is given to those already working for the EU civil service and that one must know someone on the inside to have a real chance of being recruited.

The Importance of informal networks and processes

"We all know the importance of having a network to get a job, and we usually have none, or very little".

"Preparatory materials and awareness are mostly acquired through informal networking, which reinforces social reproduction logics".



⁶ In this context, internal candidates refers to people already employed by the EU institutions with a temporary contract.



This perception is linked to the previous point. Participants insisted on the importance of having a network composed of people already working in the EU institutions and/or gravitating around the so-called 'Brussels' bubble'. The biggest issue, according to the participants, was that people from racial and ethnic minorities do not have access to such networks, which decreased their chances of getting a job in the EU civil service. Therefore, current lack of representation led to enduring lack of representation.

'Ethno-stratification' and lower-level positions

"Take a look around you, security guards or cleaning staff are much more diverse in terms of ethnicity than managers, right?".

"As people with an ethnic background tend to be concentrated in lower grade positions and contracts, this restricts the internal competitions that they could enter later on".

Some participants also referred to the lack of equal opportunities for people from racial and ethnic minorities and the risk of so-called 'ethno-stratification'. They believed that even if they did 'make it', they would most probably be limited to lower-level positions, in their words, "security and cleaning staff". Starting at lower-level positions could create obstacles for people's career progression. They also felt that they would need to fight much more than their 'white colleagues' for high-level positions.

Socio-economic status, precarity and poverty trap

"I don't have the money to pay for expensive EU trainings and books to prepare. So, I don't start at the same level as some other candidates, my chances are lower!".

Participants underscored that if you live in a rural area and go to a small local school or university, you "miss out on opportunities in terms of education and career". This point was especially highlighted by ERGO regarding the Roma community. They described the multiple obstacles Roma youth encounter in schools. Segregated schools are still a reality in some EU Member States. According to ERGO, this led often to very poor educational offer, with little or no access to information about further educational or professional opportunities.

Digital literacy remained a challenge, placing candidates from racial and ethnic minorities in a difficult position in relation to the type of computer-based tests used by EPSO. This was further compounded by these groups' lack of access to technology or online resources allowing them to prepare for those tests.

Some participants underscored the fact that people who are struggling financially, have other priorities than looking up information on EU Careers, hence the importance of reaching out to them actively.

Lack of representation and influential role models

"The low representation that minority ethnic staff face, further excludes and isolates them".

"I don't feel welcome if I don't see people like me working there".

The lack of representation of people from racial or ethnic minorities in the EU institutions and especially in higher-level positions resulted in candidates from these groups feeling less motivated to apply to EU Careers. The participants believed that even those who already work in the EU institutions feel discouraged to stay and compete for better positions as they tend to feel discriminated against and isolated, having to fight harder to get the same level of recognition of their 'white colleagues'.

Lack of intercultural competence and 'race expertise'

"I heard that you don't tackle well cases of discrimination. Why would I do that to myself? I've been through so much already ... I don't need to be more discriminated against".

"'Race expertise' {as in understanding race, racism, and its consequences in the workplace} is an undervalued skill requisite. Willingness does not equate to competence. This often leads to more 'disaster' or to slower progress".



Many participants considered this aspect to be an important obstacle to apply to EU Careers as it could lead to stereotypical perceptions, prejudice, bias, and discrimination in the workplace, making it less attractive.

The perception that bullying and discrimination in the EU civil service are not always tackled (or even reported by the victims) negatively impacted the confidence of racial and ethnic minorities thinking of applying to EU Careers.

The participants also perceived the EU institutions as workplaces where there seems to be discomfort in talking about race and in tackling discrimination. They concluded that there needs to be more training and awareness raising among staff, including managers, but also more involvement by experts, i.e., people who have sound knowledge and experience of these issues and who could offer support both to victims and to their colleagues and to the organisation in general.

Lack of trust in the EU civil service and in big international organisations

"Why do you have quotas or affirmative action for gender or disability, but not for ethnicity?"

"Why should I participate in something I don't believe in as I see no results [on diversity]?"

Some participants expressed lack of trust in the EU civil service and tended to perceive EU policies on diversity as 'window dressing'. Participants learned about various equality and diversity actions aimed to increase the 'diversity capital' of EPSO's candidate pool, and although they agree that some progress has been made, they wished to see concrete results in terms of more candidates from racial and ethnic minorities being recruited. While recognising that EPSO is improving in this area, they also wondered and expressed doubts about the situation at the recruitment stage.

Participants highlighted the fact that many people from racial and ethnic minorities did not believe that they have a chance of getting a job within the EU institutions or if they did, it would be at a lower professional level. For that reason, many asked for transparent data as to what is the current situation inside the EU institutions when it comes to the race and ethnicity of their staff, and the possibility to monitor its evolution.





Inner representation and self-censorship

"This is not for you, don't even try. They will never take you".

"It's a confidence issue that lingers within the spectrum of representations of what we see, and think is possible, tangible and believable".

The lack of positive role models, being hired often below their level of competence, having to fight harder to get the same opportunities as their 'white colleagues', all this undermines minorities' belief in their capacity to succeed leading often to self-censorship. This was an obstacle frequently identified by participants, across all backgrounds. The low level of self-esteem and the fear of failure were identified as obstacles that prevented many racial and ethnic minorities from excelling.

Research⁷ has shown that the threat of being evaluated, judged by, or treated in line with negative stereotypes about a group of which they are a member can cause individuals to actually perform worse. This psychological phenomenon is called a 'stereotype threat'. If there is a stereotype that says or implies, for instance, that racial and ethnic minorities are less intelligent or that women score lower in numerical reasoning tests, there is a risk that these groups will perform according to those stereotypes, which can reinforce their lack of self-esteem and self-censorship. 'Stereotype threat' may lead not only to performance decrements but may also impact major life decisions (i.e., choice of profession) and prevent individuals from reaching their full potential within a so-called 'threatened domain'⁸. Participants did refer to the fact that it can be hard to avoid internalising the negative stereotypes that society and the media disseminate about racial and ethnic minorities, even when you know that they are just that, stereotypes.

7 Singletary, S.L., Ruggs, E.N., & Hebl, M.R. (2009). *Stereotype Threat: Causes, Effects, and Remedies*. In B. Bogue & E. Cady (Eds.) *Applying Research to Practice (ARP) Resources*. Retrieved from <http://www.engr.psu.edu/AWE/ARPresources.aspx>

8 Gupta, V. K., & Bhawe, N. M. (2007). *The influence of proactive personality and stereotype threat on women's entrepreneurial intentions*. *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 13.



Cultural heritage and community expectations

"You cannot simply ignore the weight of centuries of social exclusion and discrimination".

"Why do better? I will end up like my parents anyway!".

In every session, this point was made regularly by all the participants regardless of their background. Participants explained that they felt "stuck" to a historical heritage which did not allow them to progress. They felt that society failed to recognise them for who they are now, i.e., educated, and competent people, and deserving of the same opportunities as everybody else. But they also felt as if they were not allowed to act differently from their ancestors and parents. For many of them, they were the only ones, or the first ones to ever graduate from university. There was sometimes a feeling of 'guilt' and of 'disloyalty' towards their community associated to trying to be and act 'more European'.



III. Suggested solutions

"You have the aesthetics of a closed shop! This must change, make diverse people more aware of your job opportunities, people don't know how to get a job in the EU institutions".

EPSO asked participants to share suggestions of practical solutions to tackle the issues raised during the sessions. We list below those suggestions, without commenting on their feasibility, to provide a full, transparent account of the results of our discussions, even when some of the suggestions made are outside EPSO's role and mandate.

Many of the suggested solutions reported below are already being implemented by EPSO, but this was not necessarily known to the participants. EPSO should thus communicate more to underrepresented groups about equality and diversity actions being undertaken by us.



Demystify EU Careers and EPSO's selection procedures

- Organise info-sessions on EU Careers: present EU employers, the profiles they are searching for, the different avenues to get a job and the concrete job opportunities on offer. Clarify the different types of contracts and grades. Show where the job offers are published and explain how to apply.
- Organise info-sessions on EPSO, focusing on its selection procedures and tests.
- EPSO should advise on how to study and how to prepare for EPSO tests and provide access to study materials for free.
- The EU institutions need a wider appreciation for a wider range of professions beyond economists, lawyers, and translators, which seem to be overvalued in relation to other types of academic and professional backgrounds.

Reduce bias in the selection procedures

- Apply a standardised selection procedure.
- Reconsider stringent educational requirements or the favouring of prestigious universities.
- Reduce the importance of having had an international study or work experience.
- Do not make the schools' names visible to recruiters before recruitment interviews take place, to reduce the risk of 'elitism'.

- Question language knowledge as a selection criterion and recognise languages such as Romani or sign language too.
- Find pragmatic solutions for university degrees obtained outside the EU and give more importance to experience and expertise.
- Create balanced selection boards in terms of diversity to reduce the risk of bias and discrimination.
- Train the selection board members and all people involved in staff selection on equality, diversity, and unconscious bias.
- EPSO could function as a clearing house for successful candidates and be the one proposing to recruiters the successful candidates that match their needs the most, for recruitment interviews.

Outreach and communication

- Communicate widely about EU Careers and not only on EPSO's website and social media.
- Practice targeted communication and become more visible to racial and ethnic minorities and underrepresented groups in general.
- Collaborate more with civil society organisations to gain the trust of their members.
- Organise outreach events in more rural and distant areas, and in smaller schools and universities.
- Give the floor to minorities who 'made it' and allow them to share their advice, the challenges they faced and how they overcame them, in EPSO's communication.
- Find more role models among those in higher-level positions.
- Reach out more specifically to the Roma community and publish videos in Romani too.
- Create groups on social media aimed to help candidates from diverse communities to get the information they need.

Positive or affirmative action

- Organise positive action programmes for candidates from racial and ethnic minorities and with lower socio-economic status.
- Define recruitment quotas for successful candidates and trainees from racial and ethnic minorities.
- Open up traineeships for non-EU citizens and build collaborations with universities outside the EU (e.g., in Africa and South America).





Equality, diversity, and inclusion in the EU institutions

- Monitor diversity data and verify if all staff members from minority groups enjoy the same career opportunities as their other colleagues.
- Challenge structural and organisational bias. Run an audit of all HR processes and communication to ensure inclusion for all staff at all levels.
- Make training on equality, diversity, and inclusion compulsory for all managers and staff.
- Consult diversity and inclusion experts and include them in the reflection of how to manage diversity and inclusion.
- Tackle and introduce clear sanctions for harassment, micro-aggressions, hostility, and discrimination at work.
- Pay traineeships better to address socio-economic disparities among trainees.
- “Walk the talk”:
 - ▶ Set the example, take the lead in representing diversity at all levels: hire people of colour at management level.
 - ▶ Include people from racial and ethnic minorities in the Diversity and Inclusion Offices, external communication units, etc. of the EU institutions.



Networking and collaboration

- Organise events with civil society organisations, EPSO and the EU institutions to allow candidates from racial and ethnic minorities to develop their personal networks.
- Organise an event between those who ‘made it’ and those who are interested to apply to EU Careers. This would allow to share ‘tips & tricks’ on how to join the EU civil service.
- Organise workshops with EPSO and the EU institutions on capacity-building, such as “how to create a good CV”, “what is a good versus a bad CV”, “how to write a good motivation letter”, “how to apply”, etc.
- Make use of EU staff from underrepresented groups to scout for talent at universities, government departments and the local community.

Power in data

- Implement a monitoring tool to collect data on diversity. Measure how many candidates from minority groups passed EPSO’s competitions and selection procedures, how many were recruited and within what timeline. Monitor whether they enjoyed the same career opportunities as their other colleagues.
- Build a strong irrefutable discourse based on data and politicise it.



IV. Conclusion

Following the results of EPSO's 2021 diversity survey, which allowed us to have a first idea of underrepresented groups in EPSO's pool of candidates, we decided to organise a 'focus group project', to obtain a better understanding of the perceived blocking factors standing in the way of people from racial and ethnic minorities to apply to EU Careers and EPSO's competitions and selection procedures. We also wanted to learn about practical solutions from the people concerned. Despite their differences, those who participated in this exercise mentioned similar perceived obstacles and solutions.

Perceived racial bias, discomfort in talking about race or ethnicity in the EU civil service, narrow recruitment pools composed of candidates coming from mainly prestigious universities, difficulty in measuring and monitoring racial and ethnic diversity, self-censorship, lack of insider knowledge and networks, these were just some of the perceived blocking factors that we learned about through this exercise.

The lack of information regarding EU Careers and EPSO's competitions was identified as the most common obstacle by participants across all groups. This was somehow surprising but also eye-opening. Surprising because EPSO has been investing in communication and outreach efforts for many years, including in targeted communication and outreach to European civil society organisations working in the field of equality, diversity, and inclusion. Despite that, we realised that many people from racial and ethnic minorities still do not know enough about EPSO's efforts, or even about EPSO's existence. From this we can conclude that there is still a lot of work for us to do in the future. We not only need to stimulate more organisations to join EPSO's dedicated database and attend our information webinars, but we also need to diversify our communication channels and go beyond our website and social media accounts.

Many of the solutions suggested through this exercise are being implemented by EPSO and are part of the 2022-2024 Equality and Diversity Action Plan. Here are some examples:

- EPSO organises regular webinars and tutorials per competition to demystify the selection criteria and procedures for all. In December 2023, EPSO's Equality and Diversity team organised a dedicated webinar for its database of 'diversity organisations' to demystify EU Careers and EPSO's competitions and to encourage their members to apply.
- EPSO has a dedicated page on its website covering equal opportunities, diversity, and inclusion matters: [Equal opportunities, Diversity and Inclusion | EU Careers \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu/european-civil-service/equality-diversity-inclusion)

- EPSO creates and shares testimonials from EU staff members with diverse backgrounds on its website and social media accounts: [Meet EU Staff | EU Careers \(europa.eu\)](#)
- EPSO created and published a video showcasing EU staff members from a diverse background: [EPSO Diversity video | EU Careers \(europa.eu\)](#).
- EU Careers Student and Staff Ambassadors are trained by EPSO on equality and diversity matters. They help EPSO to promote EU Career across the 27 Member States.

In terms of selection procedures, EPSO has been applying consistently its equal opportunities policies and strives to ensure equal access to its competitions to all candidates. Here are some examples:

- Making a dedicate page available on our website to allow candidates to familiarise themselves with the type of cognitive tests used by EPSO;: [EPSO tests | EU Careers \(europa.eu\)](#)
- EPSO will also publish, for instance, the source materials used for the creation of candidates EU knowledge tests for AD5 Generalist competitions, to level the playing field among all candidates.
- Besides the legal document (notice of competition) describing in detail all the selection procedures, EPSO publishes more accessible webpages on its website, including video tutorials, infographics, and EU staff testimonials.
- Using a standardised selection procedure, assessment tools and tests.
- Simplifying the competition model by removing the oral selection tests (i.e., assessment centre).
- Ensuring anonymous marking of written tests.
- Ensuring reasonable accommodations for candidates with specific needs due to a disability or a medical condition, as well as in case of pregnancy and breastfeeding.
- Actively seeking balanced selection boards in terms of diversity to avoid risks of bias and discrimination.
- Providing compulsory training to board members and assessors on objective assessment and how to avoid unconscious bias.

Two years ago, EPSO created a network of Equality and Diversity Coordinators from the Member States, which meets online twice a year, to exchange with EPSO on best practices in the field.

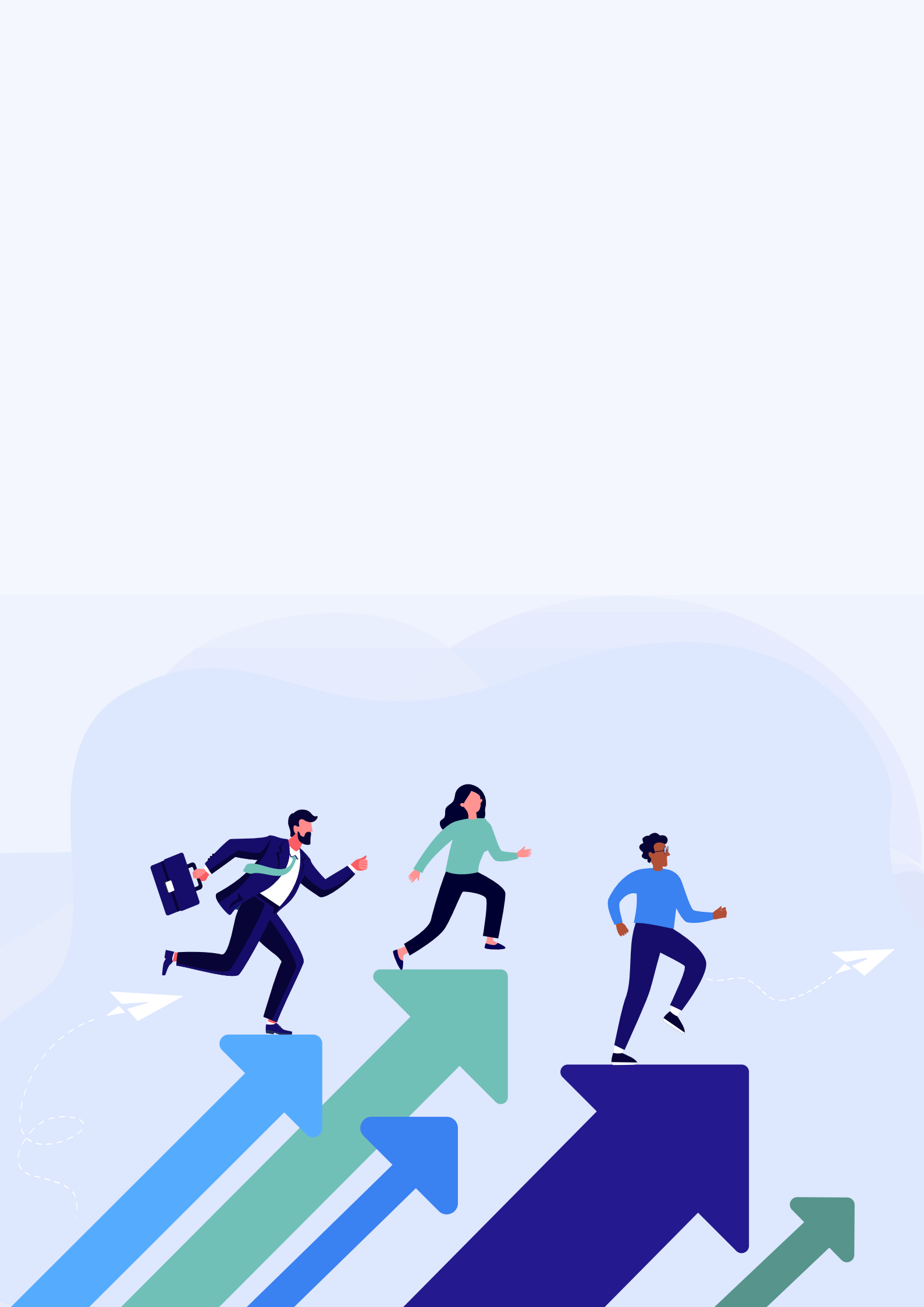
EPSO plans to continue to publish every two years its survey to measure progress in terms of the diversity of its candidate pool. The second survey was launched at the end of May 2024, targeting a pool of 58.613 former candidates to EPSO's (closed) competitions from 2021 to 2023. Publication of the results is planned for the end of 2024.

Acknowledgements

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Learn more about EPSO's ongoing activities on Equality and Diversity on its dedicated page on [Equal Opportunities](#)

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