

Part C

Guidelines for Procedural Aspects of Substantive Examination

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Chapter I – Introduction

1. General remark

In this Part C of the Guidelines the term "examiner" is used to mean the examiner entrusted with substantive examination forming part of the Examining Division, which is responsible for the final decision. *Art. 18*

Chapters C-II to IX set out the general procedure for examination, together with guidance on particular matters where necessary. They do not provide detailed instructions on matters of internal administration.

2. Work of an examiner

The attitude of the examiner is very important. He should always try to be constructive and helpful. While it would of course be quite wrong for an examiner to overlook any major deficiency in an application, he should have a sense of proportion and not pursue unimportant objections. He should bear in mind that, subject to the requirements of the EPC, the drafting of the description and claims of a European application is the responsibility of the applicant or his authorised representative.

The attention of the examiner is particularly directed to the instruction in paragraph 4.3 of the General Part of the Guidelines. This applies not only in relation to other departments of the EPO. It also means, for example, that the other members of an Examining Division should not attempt to repeat the work of the primary examiner (see C-VIII, 4).

3. Overview

Part C of the Guidelines deals with matters of examination procedure (see Chapters C-II to IX).

Matters of substantive law, i.e. the requirements which a European application must fulfil, are dealt with in Parts F, G and H.

4. Purpose of examination

The purpose of preparing the search opinion (see B-XI) and of the subsequent examination proceedings is to ensure that the application and the invention to which it relates meet the requirements set out in the relevant Articles of the EPC and the Rules of its Implementing Regulations. The prime task of the Examining Division is to deal with the substantive requirements; the criteria by which an examiner judges whether they have been met are dealt with in detail, insofar as appears necessary, in Parts F, G and H. As for the formal requirements (see Part A), these are initially the responsibility of the Receiving Section. *Art. 94(1)*
Art. 164(1)
Rule 62(1)

Rule 70(2)

The examination is to be carried out in accordance with Art. 94(3) and (4), Art. 97, Rule 71(1) to 71(7), Rule 71a(1) to 71a(6) and Rule 72. The examiner's first step is to study the description, drawings (if any) and the claims of the application. However, as the examiner will normally already have done this when he carried out the search (see B-XI, 3), he should concentrate on any amendments and/or comments filed by the applicant in response to the search opinion (see B-XI, 8). If amendments were made and these have not been identified and/or their basis in the application as filed not indicated by the applicant (see H-III, 2.1) and the application is one of those mentioned in H-III, 2.1.4, the Examining Division may send a communication according to Rule 137(4) requesting the applicant to provide this information (see H-III, 2.1.1).

Chapter II – Formal requirements to be met before the Division starts substantive examination

1. Request for examination

In order that examination of a European application can begin, the applicant is required to file a request for examination, which, however, is not deemed to be filed until after the examination fee has been paid. The request for examination may be filed from the date on which the application is filed up to the end of six months after the date on which the European Patent Bulletin mentions the publication of the European search report. If the request for examination is not filed within this period, the application is deemed to be withdrawn. However, in such a case, the applicant has the possibility of filing a request for further processing pursuant to Art. 121. According to Rule 70(1), the request for examination may not be withdrawn.

Art. 94
Art. 121
Rule 70
Art. 122(4)
Rule 136(3)

Subject to certain exceptions, the applicant must also respond to the search opinion within the above-mentioned period for filing the request for examination (see B-XI, 9 and C-II, 3.1), unless the EPO invites him to confirm an early request for examination according to Rule 70(2), in which case he must respond to the search opinion within the period provided for under Rule 70(2) (see C-II, 1.1).

Rule 70a(1) and (3)

Responsibility for examining the application passes from the Receiving Section to the Examining Division at the time when a request for examination is filed. This is subject to two exceptions:

Rule 10
Rule 70(2)

- (i) if the applicant has filed a request for examination before the European search report has been sent to him, then the Examining Division is responsible only from the time when the confirmation of the request is received by the EPO following an invitation under Rule 70(2);
- (ii) if the applicant has filed a request for examination before the European search report has been sent to him and has also waived the right to receive an invitation to confirm under Rule 70(2) (see C-VI, 3), then the Examining Division is responsible only from the time when the search report is sent to the applicant.

1.1 Confirmation of early request for examination

If the applicant has filed a request for examination before the search report has been transmitted to him, the EPO will invite him to confirm, within a six-month period, that he desires to proceed further with his application. This six-month period is calculated from the mention of the publication of the European search report. Where the applicant also has to respond to the search opinion, his response is required within this same period (see B-XI, 8 and C-II, 3.1). In these cases, the

Rule 70(2) and (3)
Art. 121
Art. 11 RFees
Rule 70a(2) and (3)

applicant's response to the search opinion is interpreted as the confirmation required by Rule 70(2), even where not explicitly expressed as such. If the applicant fails to confirm his desire to proceed further with the application in due time in reply to this invitation, the application will be deemed to be withdrawn. In this case, however, the means of redress provided for in Art. 121 (further processing of the application) will apply (see A-VI, 2.2 and 2.3). For the conditions applicable to a refund of the examination fee if the application is withdrawn, refused or deemed to be withdrawn, see A-VI, 2.5.

1.2 Euro-PCT applications

Art. 153(4), (6) and (7)
Art. 150(2)
Rule 159(1)(f)

If the application has proceeded via the PCT (Euro-PCT application), the six-month period under Rule 70(1) begins with the publication of the PCT search report or the declaration under Art. 17(2)(a) PCT. However, as is laid down in Art. 150(2), the time limit for requesting examination in a Euro-PCT case does not expire before the time prescribed in Art. 22 PCT and Art. 39 PCT (i.e. not before the time limit of Rule 159(1)(f)). The time limit will not be affected by whether a supplementary European search pursuant to Art. 153(7) needs to be made or whether the international application pursuant to Art. 153(4) is again published by the EPO.

Art. 121
Rule 136(3)
Rule 160(1)

If the request for examination of a Euro-PCT application has not been filed within the time limit, the application is deemed withdrawn under Rule 160(1). In such a case, however, the applicant has the possibility of filing a request for further processing pursuant to Art. 121.

Where the Euro-PCT application is subject to the preparation of a supplementary European search report (see B-II, 4.3), once this search report to the applicant has been dispatched to him, the applicant is sent a communication according to Rule 70(2), inviting him to confirm the request for examination within six months of the notification of that communication (see E-VIII, 2.5.3).

1.3 Invention to be examined

Rule 36

It is to be noted that where the search report and the search opinion have been drawn up to cover several inventions lacking unity, the applicant is free to select the invention to be examined in the application under consideration. The others will be subject to objections of lack of unity and may be divided out according to Rule 36 (see C-III, 3.2 and C-IX, 1.3).

2. Allocation of the application

The dossier will normally be allocated to an Examining Division responsible for the examination of applications in the technical field in which the particular application has been classified by the Search Division or ISA which carried out the search. It is usual for the primary examiner entrusted with the examination of the application in accordance with Art. 18(2) to be the same person who prepared the (supplementary) European search report and search opinion or, where

the EPO was the ISA or the authority specified for the supplementary international search, the international search report and WO-ISA or the supplementary international search report.

There may, however, be instances where it is appropriate to allocate the application to an Examining Division comprising examiners who are not normally responsible for the indicated part of the IPC and who might not have been involved at the search stage. There are a number of possible reasons for this: e.g. to make it possible, where appropriate, that an original and a divisional application are dealt with by the same Examining Division (this could sometimes be more efficient even when the two applications are classified in different technical fields); or if the classification of the published application does not correspond to the subject-matter of the application in the form in which it reaches the substantive examiner (e.g. because the application has been amended after receipt of the search report and search opinion).

3. Response filed before first communication in examination

3.1 Response to the search opinion

Following receipt of the search report and search opinion, and prior to the first communication from the examining division, the applicant must (subject to certain exceptions) respond to the search opinion, by filing amendments to the description, claims or drawings and/or filing his observations on the objections raised in the search opinion (see B-XI, 8 for details, in particular as to the exceptions where no reply is required). In order to avoid delays, care should be taken to comply with the requirements of Rule 137(4) when filing such amendments (see OJ EPO 2009, 533, point 7). Any amendments filed at this stage are made by the applicant of his own volition in accordance with Rule 137(2) (for more details, see C-III, 2.1).

Rule 137(2)

Rule 70(2)

Rule 70a

The applicant's response to the search opinion required by Rule 70a (or filed voluntarily in response to search opinions not requiring a response) will be taken into account by the Examining Division when drafting the first communication. Failure to respond to this communication in due time will result in the application being deemed withdrawn according to Art. 94(4), although this loss of rights is subject to further processing (with regard to what constitutes a valid response, see B-XI, 8).

Art. 94(3) and (4)

Rule 62(1)

If the European search report or supplementary European search report was accompanied by a search opinion but was drawn up before 1 April 2010 (such that a reply to the search opinion was not mandatory - see B-XI, 8) and the applicant did not reply to it, a communication referring to the search opinion and setting a time limit for reply would have been issued as the first communication under Art. 94(3). Failure to respond to this communication in due time would have resulted in the application being deemed withdrawn according to Art. 94(4).

The procedure explained in the above paragraphs also applies to Euro-PCT applications for which the EPO prepares a supplementary European search report and a search opinion (see B-II, 4.3 and B-XI, 1.1).

3.2 Response to PCT actions prepared by the EPO

Rule 161(1)

For Euro-PCT applications where the EPO acted as the International Searching Authority (ISA) and, where a demand under Art. 31 PCT was filed, also as the International Preliminary Examining Authority, or as the authority specified for supplementary international search, the applicant will already have responded to a negative WO-ISA, IPER or supplementary international search report prepared by the EPO (unless the communication under Rule 161 was issued before 1 April 2010 - see E-VIII, 3.3.3).

This response may comprise amendments and/or observations filed in response to the communication under Rule 161(1) (or possibly filed earlier - see E-VIII, 3.3.1). Any amendments filed at this stage are made by the applicant of his own volition in accordance with Rule 137(2) (for more details see C-III, 2.2). This response will be taken into account by the Examining Division when drafting the first communication according to Art. 94(3). For more details, see E-VIII, 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3.

3.3 The invitation under Rule 70a(1)

Under Rule 70a(1) the applicant is invited to respond to the ESOP within the period referred to in Rule 70(1) or, where applicable, within the period referred to in Rule 70(2) (see B-XI, 8), unless the applicant has waived the communication under Rule 70(2) (see C-VI, 3).

Where the request for examination (including payment of the examination fee) is filed after the search report has been transmitted to the applicant, the applicant must respond to the ESOP within the period referred to in Rule 70(1). In such cases the invitation under Rule 70a(1) is sent in a single communication together with the communication according to Rule 69(1) (see A-VI, 2.1). This combined communication under Rule 70a(1) and Rule 69(1) is issued shortly after the mention of the publication of the European search report in the European Patent Bulletin (in general, this is approximately one week later).

Where the request for examination (including payment of the examination fee) is filed before the search report has been transmitted to the applicant, the applicant must respond to the ESOP within the period referred to in Rule 70(2). In such cases the invitation under Rule 70a(1) is sent in a single communication together with the communication according to Rule 70(2). With regard to how the period referred to in Rule 70(2) is calculated for these cases, see C-II, 1.1, for Euro-direct applications and C-II, 1.2, for Euro-PCT applications for which a supplementary European search report is prepared.

4. Designation fee(s), extension fees

Under Rule 39(1), the designation fee(s) can be validly paid up to the same time limit as the examination fee and therefore will be generally paid at the same time as the examination fee. The examination whether and to what extent a designation fee has been validly paid has been entrusted to the formalities officer by virtue of Rule 11(3); see the Decision of the President of the EPO dated 12 July 2007 (Special edition No. 3, OJ EPO 2007, F.2). The same applies to the examination as to whether extension fees have been paid, see A-III, 12.2.

Rule 39(1)

Art. 90(3)

5 Copy of the search results on the priority or priorities

Where the EPO notes, at the time the Examining Division assumes responsibility, that a copy of the results of a search on the claimed priority or priorities as referred to in Rule 141(1) has not been filed by the applicant and is not deemed to be duly filed under Rule 141(2) (see A-III, 6.12), it invites the applicant to file, within a period of two months, the copy or a statement that the results of the search referred to in Rule 141(1) are not available to him. This requirement applies to European or Euro-PCT applications filed on or after 1 January 2011 (see OJ EPO 2009, 585). This communication is also sent in cases where the priority in question has since been withdrawn or has lapsed.

Rule 70b(1)

Failure to reply to this invitation in due time results in the application being deemed to be withdrawn. Further processing is available for this loss of rights (see E-VII, 2.1).

Rule 70b(2)

The search results provided by the applicant will be included in the file and will be open to file inspection (see A-XI).

Chapter III – The first stage of examination

1. Missing drawings or parts of the description filed under Rule 56 or claims filed after accordane of a date of filing

Where the applicant has supplied missing drawings or parts of the description after accordane of a filing date (see A-II, 5) under Rule 56, and the Receiving Section has determined that the missing drawings or parts of the description are "completely contained" in the claimed priority application, the application is not re-dated to the date on which the missing drawings or parts of the description were supplied. The Examining Division may review the findings of the Receiving Section on the applicability of Rule 56(3), unless those findings have become final after a decision of a Board of Appeal. Should the Examining Division come to the conclusion that the missing elements are not "completely contained" in the priority document, contrary to the original finding of the Receiving Section, it must communicate this to the applicant and, once it has been established that the right to be heard under Art. 113(1) has been observed, notify him of the new date of filing (see A-II, 5). The Examining Division must also inform the applicant that the missing drawings or parts of the description can still be withdrawn within two months from the date of notification of the new date of filing. If the applicant opts for withdrawal, the re-dating of the application will be deemed not to have been made (see also B-XI, 2.1). For Euro-PCT applications a review is possible under Rule 82ter PCT.

Rule 56

If the applicant does not agree with the finding of the Examining Division, he may (within the above time limit) request an appealable decision on the matter. In this case, the examiner will issue a reasoned decision, informing the applicant of the new date of filing, of the reasons for the re-dating and (where appropriate) of the detrimental effect of the re-dating on the claimed priority right. This decision will allow a separate appeal according to Art. 106(2).

Rule 111

Once the period for filing an appeal has expired without an appeal being filed, the examiner will resume examination on the basis of the new date of filing.

If the applicant files an appeal in due time, competence for the file passes to the Board of Appeal for reviewing the decision on the accordane of a filing date. While the case is pending before the Board of Appeal, the Examining Division will not continue substantive examination. Once the Board of Appeal has issued a decision, the file will be returned to the examiner, who will be bound on this point by the decision of the Board (Art. 111(2)). He will then resume examination.

If the claims were not present at the date of filing the application, the Examining Division must check whether the subsequently filed claims satisfy the requirements of Art.123(2). If the basis for these subsequently filed claims in the application as filed has not been indicated by the applicant (see H-III, 2.1) and the application is one of

Art. 123(2)

those mentioned in H-III, 2.1.4, the Examining Division may send a communication according to Rule 137(4) requesting the applicant to provide this information (see H-III, 2.1.1).

2. Amendments made by the applicant of his own volition

Any amendment, including any made by the applicant of his own volition, must satisfy the following conditions:

Art. 123(2)

- (i) it must not add subject-matter to the content of the application as filed (see H-IV, 2.3 and H-V, 1 to 7);
- (ii) it must not itself cause the application as amended to be objectionable under the EPC, e.g. the amendment must not introduce a lack of clarity into the claims (Art. 84); and
- (iii) it must comply with Rule 137(5) (see H-II, 6).

If the amendments do not meet these conditions, the applicant should be told that the amended application cannot be allowed. Apart from the amendments referred to in C-III, 2.1 and 2.2, which are admissible under Rule 137(2), the applicant may correct obvious errors at any time (see H-VI, 4.2.1).

If amendments are made and these are not identified and/or their basis in the application as filed not indicated by the applicant (see H-III, 2.1) and the application is one of those mentioned in H-III, 2.1.4, the Examining Division may send a communication according to Rule 137(4) requesting the applicant to provide this information (see H-III, 2.1.1).

2.1 Amendments made in response to the search opinion

Rule 137(2) and (3)

The amendments referred to in C-II, 3.1 are made by the applicant "of his own volition" (the applicant is required to respond to the search opinion in the EESR, but does not necessarily have to respond by filing amendments; he can also respond by filing observations on the search opinion – see B-XI, 8). This means that the applicant is not restricted to amendment(s) necessary to remedy a defect in his application. Further amendments may be made only with the consent of the Examining Division (see H-II, 2.3).

2.2 Amendments made in response to the WO-ISA, IPER or supplementary international search report

Rule 137(2)

For Euro-PCT applications where the EPO acted as International Searching Authority (ISA) or as the authority specified for supplementary international search, any amendments which the applicant files in response to the communication under Rule 161(1) (see E-VIII, 3.3.4) are made by the applicant of his own volition. This means that they may be submitted to overcome objections raised in the WO-ISA, IPER or supplementary international search report or they may be suggested for some other reason, e.g. to remedy some lack of clarity which the applicant himself has noted in the original

documents. In order to avoid delays, care should be taken to comply with the requirements of Rule 137(4) when filing such amendments. Furthermore, the applicant may also file observations in place of or in addition to amendments.

3. Unity of invention

3.1 Relation to unity in search; limitation to searched invention

An objection of lack of unity of invention, if applicable, should already have been raised at the search stage. If such an objection was not raised, but the Examining Division nevertheless considers that the requirements of Art. 82 are not met, the question of lack of unity will be addressed as early as possible during examination.

Art. 82

3.1.1 No additional search fees paid

If the applicant has not availed himself of the opportunity to have the search results on the other inventions included in the search report because he has paid no additional search fees in response to the invitation under Rule 64(1) (see B-VII, 1.2), he will be taken to have elected that the application should proceed on the basis of the invention which has been searched (see G 2/92).

Rule 64

The same applies where the applicant has paid no additional international search fees to the EPO acting as ISA in response to the communication under Art. 17(3)(a) PCT (leading to the preparation of an international search report by the EPO relating only to the invention first mentioned in the claims, see also E-VIII, 4.2). The same also applies where the EPO prepares a supplementary European search report (see B-II, 4.3 and B-VII, 2.3) limited to the invention first mentioned in the claims because of a lack of unity, and where the EPO prepares a supplementary international search report on one invention, also as a result of a finding of a lack of unity.

Rule 164(1) and (2)

It must be taken into account that the final responsibility for establishing whether the application meets the requirement of unity of invention ultimately rests with the Examining Division (see T 631/97). When considering the issue of unity, the Examining Division will consider both the reasons given in the search opinion and the applicant's response thereto (see B-XI, 8 for details of when a response to the search opinion is required); for Euro-PCT cases where no supplementary European search report is prepared, the Examining Division will consider the reasons given in the WO-ISA, IPER or supplementary international search report prepared by the EPO and the applicant's response thereto as required by Rule 161(1) (see E-VIII, 3.2). In the absence of any convincing response from the applicant to the issue of unity as raised earlier, the Examining Division will normally initially uphold the position taken earlier (see B-XI, 1.2) and will then require deletion of all the inventions other than that which has been searched. If the Examining Division is convinced, e.g. by arguments from the applicant, that the opinion on unity at the search stage was incorrect, then an additional search is performed for that

part of the subject-matter which is judged to be unitary with an invention which was searched (see B-II, 4.2(iii) and C-IV, 7.2) and the examination is carried out on those claims which comply with the requirement of unity of invention. The applicant may file a divisional application for any excised subject-matter (see C-III, 3.2).

3.1.2 Additional search fees paid

If the applicant has taken the opportunity to have other inventions searched, then he may determine that the application is to proceed on the basis of any of these, the other(s) being deleted. If the applicant has not yet done so, the examiner should at the beginning of substantive examination, if he maintains the objection of lack of unity (see C-III, 3.1.1), invite the applicant to state on which invention the prosecution of the application should be based and to limit the application accordingly by excising those parts belonging to the other inventions. For the latter inventions, the applicant may file divisional applications (see C-III, 3.2).

3.2 Excision of other inventions; filing divisional applications

Rule 36

For inventions which the applicant has deleted in accordance with C-III, 3.1.1 or 3.1.2, the applicant may file divisional applications.

The filing of a divisional application is subject to the proviso that this is only possible if, when a divisional application is filed, the application being divided is still pending (see A-IV, 1.1.1.1) and at least one of the periods provided for under Rule 36(1)(a) and (b) has not yet expired (see A-IV, 1.1.1.2 and 1.1.1.3).

3.3 Refund of additional search fees

Rule 64(2)

If the applicant has paid further search fees in response to an invitation of the Search Division under Rule 64(1) and has requested a refund of these, the Examining Division is required to review the validity of the finding of lack of unity (see also F-V, 10 to 13).

Requests for refunds should be handled promptly. If the examiner concludes that a request for refund should not be granted, an interlocutory decision to that effect should be issued at the earliest opportunity, subject to the requirements of Art. 113(1), and the issuing of the decision should not normally be left until the final decision on the application. Of course, if the stage in the procedure at which the examiner is in a position to issue the decision on the refund coincides with the issuing of either a Rule 71(3) communication or a decision refusing the application, then in the former case the interlocutory decision can be issued with the Rule 71(3) communication, and in the latter case the decision on the refund can be included in the decision refusing the application. An interlocutory decision issued on this matter will allow separate appeal under Art. 106(2).

Moreover, it is essential to bear in mind that the review under Rule 64(2) is restricted to a reconsideration of the validity of that original finding under the circumstances existing at the time the

Rule 64(1) invitation was sent, taking into account only the prior art which was available at that time. For more details on the assessment of unity of invention see F-V.

The issue of refunds of additional **international** search fees paid to the EPO acting as ISA in response to an invitation under Art. 17(3)(a) PCT, however, does not arise in the European phase, because these fees were paid in the international phase, which is closed by this stage of the procedure. The applicant may contest the payment of additional international search fees to the EPO acting as ISA by paying these under protest according to Rule 40.2(c) PCT. However, this must be done in the **international** phase (see also the Decision of the President of the EPO dated 24 March 2010, OJ EPO 2010, 320 and the Notice from the EPO dated 24 March 2010, OJ EPO 2010, 322).

3.4 Changing from one searched invention to another

Having limited the claims to one searched invention, the applicant may not amend them to switch to a different searched invention. In such a case the Examining Division will exercise its discretion under Rule 137(3) to refuse to admit the amendments (see H-II, 7.1).

4. First communication

If deficiencies persist in the application even after the applicant has filed his response to the search opinion, the Examining Division will issue a communication according to Art. 94(3) and Rule 71(1), (2) in subsequent examination proceedings and will consider the applicant's reply thereto before issuing a decision or a summons to oral proceedings.

Rule 71(1) and (2)

Rule 132

Art. 94(3)

When drawing up such a communication, the Examining Division will take into account the documents (if any) cited in the search report and any further documents found as the result of the search referred to in C-IV, 7.1, as well as any amendments proposed, or comments made, by the applicant in reply to the search opinion (see B-XI, 8) or in reply to the communication under Rule 161(1) (see E-VIII, 3). The examiner should identify in this communication any requirements of the EPC which, in his opinion, the application does not satisfy. The communication will give reasons for any objections raised and will invite the applicant within a specified period to file his observations or submit amendments. The filed application documents are not sent back to the applicant although a copy of the description and claims may be sent in appropriate cases (see H-III, 2). When the applicant has replied, the examiner will then re-examine the application.

If no search opinion has been issued (see C-VI, 3, F-V, 13.1(ii) and B-XI, 1.1), the examiner's first communication under Art. 94(3) will, as a general rule (see B-XI, 3) and by analogy with the search opinion, cover all objections to the application (see B-XI, 3.4, for exceptional cases where not all objections are raised).

4.1 Reasoned objections

Rule 71(2)

As with the search opinion, for each objection the communication should indicate the part of the application which is deficient and the requirement of the EPC which is not met, either by referring to specific Articles or Rules, or by other clear indication; it should also give the reason for any objection where this is not immediately apparent (for more details see B-XI, 3.2).

4.2 Invitation to file comments and amendments

Rule 71(1) and (2)

Art. 94(3) and (4)

The communication should include an invitation to the applicant to file his observations, to correct any deficiencies and, if necessary, to submit amendments to the description, claims and drawings. It must also state the period within which the applicant must reply. Failure to reply in due time will cause the application to be deemed withdrawn (see C-VI, 1 and E-VII, 1). Further processing applies to this loss of rights (E-VII, 2.1).

5. Requesting information on prior art (not confined to priority)

Art. 124

Rule 141(3)

The EPO may invite the applicant to submit, within a period of two months, information on prior art which has been taken into consideration in national or regional patent proceedings concerning an invention to which the European patent application relates. This in particular encompasses search results with respect to filings whose priority is not being claimed, and it also enables the EPO to request, *inter alia*, the copy of the results of the search on the priority or priorities referred to in Rule 141(1), where the search results were not available to the applicant when requested under Rule 70b(1) (see the Notice from the EPO dated 28 July 2010, OJ EPO 2010, 410). Failure on the part of the applicant to comply with this invitation results in the application being deemed to be withdrawn under Art. 124(2). Further processing is available for this loss of rights (see E-VII, 2.1).

In view of the considerable work such invitations may imply for applicants, further requests under Rule 141(3) will be issued only in individual cases, where there are cogent reasons to suspect the existence of additional, relevant prior art.

This invitation is an independent communication, and the above-mentioned time limit is non-extendable. The invitation can be sent by itself or at the same time as a communication according to Art. 94(3). If sent at the same time, the time limits set in both communications are independent of one another. Any information on prior art provided by the applicant will be included in the file and will be open to file inspection (see A-XI).

6. Evaluation of prior art documents cited in search report and late priority claim

As explained in A-III, 6.5.1 and 6.5.2, the applicant has the right to correct or to introduce a priority claim within 16 months of the earliest priority (with a minimum of four months from the European filing date in the case of corrections). When this happens before finalisation of the

search report, the examiner may review the draft search report to take into account the change in the effective date of the application. In cases where the search report was issued on the basis of the original priority status (i.e. addition or correction of a priority claim is effected after the search report is drawn up), the primary examiner at the substantive examination stage should re-evaluate the relevance of the documents cited in the search report. Where it appears that the prior art available to the examiner is unlikely to reflect the state of the art in a sufficiently complete way for the purpose of a patentability assessment, the examiner should then conduct an additional search (see C-IV, 7.2). No further search report will be issued in these cases: the applicant will be informed of any newly-found documents in a communication pursuant to Art. 94(3) (with copies of such documents annexed to that communication).

Chapter IV – Examination of replies and further stages of examination

1. General procedure

Following the applicant's reply to the search opinion (see B-XI, 8), WO-ISA, IPER or supplementary international search report prepared by the EPO (see E-VIII, 3) or to the first communication, the examiner must examine the application, taking into account observations or amendments made by the applicant.

Where the application is one of those mentioned in H-III, 2.1.4, Rule 137(4) requires that any amendments made by the applicant in reply to the search opinion, WO-ISA, IPER or supplementary international search report be identified and their basis in the application as filed indicated. Failure to comply with this requirement may result in the Examining Division sending a communication according to Rule 137(4). For more details of the procedure, see H-III, 2.1.1 and 2.1.2.

In the case of one or more auxiliary request(s) directed to alternative texts for grant of a patent, every such request qualifies as a text submitted or agreed by the applicant within the meaning of Art. 113(2) and therefore must be dealt with in the order indicated or agreed to by the applicant, up to and including the highest-ranking allowable request, if any (see also H-III, 3 and C-V, 1.1). It is also to be noted that, for the types of application mentioned in H-III, 2.1.4, Rule 137(4) must also be complied with in respect of auxiliary requests, which may also be subject to a communication according to Rule 137(4).

2. Extent of examination of replies

After the first examination stage, provided that the:

- search opinion,
- WO-ISA (when prepared by the EPO),
- explanation accompanying the supplementary international search report under Rule 45*bis*.7(e) PCT (when prepared by the EPO, see the Notice from the EPO dated 24 March 2010, OJ EPO 2010, 316, point 6),
- IPER (when prepared by the EPO), or
- first communication (see B-XI, 1.1 and 8)

was comprehensive and clear (see B-XI, 3, and C-III, 4 and 4.1), the examiner will not normally need to completely reread the application but rather should concentrate on the amendments themselves, the related passages, and the deficiencies previously noted.

3. Further action upon examination of replies

Art. 94(3)

The examiner should be guided at this stage by the over-riding principle that a final position (grant or refusal) should be reached in as few actions as possible, and he should control the procedure with this always in mind. The EPC provides that the process of communicating with the applicant described in C-III, 4, is repeated "as often as necessary".

In most cases, the applicant will have tried to deal with all the examiner's objections (see B-XI, 8).

Art. 113(1)

If examination of the applicant's reply shows that despite his submissions objections persist, and provided that at least one communication has been sent in examination proceedings (see C-III, 4 and E-VIII, 4.1) and the applicant has been given the right to be heard (Art. 113(1)), i.e. the decision is based solely on grounds on which he has had an opportunity to comment, the application is to be refused (see T 201/98).

If examination of the applicant's reply shows that he has not dealt with all the main objections in his reply, it may be appropriate to draw the deficiencies to his attention, e.g. by telephone. But if no positive reaction is to be expected, the examiner should consider recommending to the other members of the Examining Division that the application be refused immediately (again provided that at least one communication has been sent in examination proceedings).

In most cases, however, examination of the applicant's reply will show that there are good prospects of bringing the proceedings to a positive conclusion, i.e. in the form of a decision to grant. In such cases, if there are still objections to be met, the examiner must consider whether they can best be resolved by a further written communication, a telephone discussion or a personal interview. If substantial differences of opinion exist, the issues are generally best dealt with in writing. If, however, there seems to be confusion about points in dispute, e.g. the applicant seems to have misunderstood the examiner's arguments or the applicant's own arguments are unclear, then an interview may be useful. If, on the other hand, the matters to be resolved are minor, they can be settled more expeditiously over the telephone. Interviews or telephone discussions with the applicant or his representative are more fully considered in C-VII, 2. Telephone discussions or interviews do not constitute oral proceedings (see E-II).

4. Later stages of examination

Similar considerations apply to later stages of examination on the understanding that, having regard to the principle stated in C-IV, 3, the greater the number of actions which have already taken place, the greater is the likelihood that the most appropriate action is to refer the application to the other members of the Examining Division for a decision. Where this decision is to refuse the application, particular

care should be taken to ensure that the decision does not offend against Art. 113(1).

5. Examination of amendments

Any amendment must satisfy the conditions listed in C-III, 2. When it was effected must also be established.

6. Admissibility of amendments made by the applicant

For matters relating to the admissibility of amendments made in examination proceedings see H-II, 2. *Rule 137(2) and (3)*

7. Search-related issues in examination

7.1 Search for conflicting European applications

The examiner should make a search for any additional conflicting European applications falling within the area defined by Art. 54(3), unless this was already covered by the search report.

This is because as a general rule the search files will not be complete in respect of such material at the time the main search is made. Since priority dates claimed (if any) may not be accorded to all or part of the application but may be accorded to the appropriate part of a conflicting application (see F-VI, 2.1), this search should be extended so as to cover all European applications published up to eighteen months after the filing of the application under consideration. If the examiner is unable to complete this "topping-up" search at the time the search opinion or the first communication under Art. 94(3) is prepared, he should ensure that such search is completed before the application is reported to be in order for the grant of a patent. In the rare case in which the application is found to be in order before this search can be completed (e.g. due to a request for accelerated prosecution of an application not claiming priority, "PACE", see Notice from the EPO dated 4 May 2010, OJ EPO 2010, 352), the grant of a patent should be postponed until the topping-up search can be completed.

The top-up search performed in examination takes into consideration, *inter alia*, any potentially relevant prior art cited by other Patent Offices on applications belonging to the same patent family as the application under examination at the EPO.

7.2 Additional searches during examination

An additional search will sometimes be required either at the first stage of amendment or subsequently. This may arise for a number of reasons. First, an additional search may be necessary where a declaration or a partial search taking the place of the search report under Rule 63 has been issued at the search stage after an invitation under Rule 63(1) (see B-VIII, 3.1 and 3.2), and subsequently the deficiencies which rendered a meaningful search impossible under Rule 63 have been corrected by amendment complying with Rule 137(5) (see H-II, 6.1) or successfully refuted by the applicant. Secondly, an additional search may also be necessary where the

applicant successfully argues that a plurality of independent claims in the same category, which led to a limitation of the search report in accordance with Rule 62a (see B-VIII, 4.1 and 4.2), is in fact allowable according to the exceptions provided for in Rule 43(2) (see F-IV, 3.2). Thirdly, an additional search may be necessary where a particular part of the application has not been searched because of an objection of lack of unity of invention, and the arguments put forward by the applicant have convinced the Examining Division that unity is given. Fourthly, an additional search may be necessary where the claims have been so amended that their scope is no longer covered by the original search. Exceptionally, an additional search may be required if the applicant resiles from an acknowledgement of prior art (see G-VII, 5.1) or if the examiner believes that material relevant to obviousness might be found in technical fields not taken into account during the search. Finally, an additional search may be necessary if the applicant has introduced a new priority claim after the date of filing (see C-III, 6).

Art. 153(6) and (7)

If the application has been filed under the PCT, the search report will be the international search report made under the PCT, which will be accompanied by a supplementary European search report, unless the Administrative Council has decided that a supplementary report is to be dispensed with (see E-VIII, 3.2). Both of these reports will have to be considered by the examiner when deciding whether any additional search is required.

7.3 Search at the examination stage

Although in principle all search work (other than for Art. 54(3) material) should be done at the search stage, in exceptional circumstances the examiner is not barred from looking for a relevant document whose existence he knows of or has reason to suspect, if he can retrieve that document in a short time.

7.4 Citing documents not mentioned in the search report

A copy of any document cited by the examiner but not mentioned in the search report, for example one found in a search under C-IV, 7.1 or 7.2, should be sent to the applicant and identified in the electronic dossier (see the Decision of the President of the EPO dated 12 July 2007, Special edition No. 3, OJ EPO 2007, J.2).

Chapter V – The final stage of examination

1. Communication under Rule 71(3)

1.1 Text for approval

Once the Examining Division has decided that a patent can be granted it must inform the applicant of the text on the basis of which it intends to do so. This text may include amendments and corrections made by the Examining Division on its own initiative which it can reasonably expect the applicant to accept. In case of doubt as to whether the applicant would agree to the amendments proposed by the Examining Division, the applicant should be contacted by telephone or an official communication has to be written. The applicant's agreement to such amendments will usually be minuted in the communication according to Rule 71(3) (see C-VII, 2.5). *Rule 71(3)*

Examples of amendments where no such consultation with the applicant is required are the following:

- (a) bringing a statement of invention in the description into conformity with the claims
- (b) deletion of vague general statements in the description (see F-IV, 4.4) or of obviously irrelevant matter (see F-II, 7.4)
- (c) insertion of values in SI units (see F-II, 4.13)
- (d) insertion of reference numerals in claims, unless the applicant is known to object to this or has previously objected to this
- (e) introduction of a summary of background art which clearly represents the prior art closest to the invention
- (f) amendments which, in spite of the fact that they change the meaning or scope of an independent claim, would very clearly have to be made, so that it can be assumed that the applicant would not object to them
- (g) correction of linguistic and other minor errors
- (h) reformulation of method-of-treatment claims into an allowable format (see G-II, 4.2).

Examples of amendments which may not be proposed without consulting the applicant are:

- (a) amendments which significantly change the meaning or scope of the claims, if there are different ways of amending the claim, so that the examiner cannot assume to which possibility the applicant will agree.

- (b) deletion of entire claims, with the exception of so-called "omnibus claims" (i.e. claims reading "An apparatus substantially as described herein", or the like)
- (c) combining claims so as to overcome a novelty or inventive step objection.

With regard to such amendments and corrections made by the Division, it is important to bear in mind that the above list is designed to avoid changes which the applicant is more likely to reject, thus helping to avoid delays in the conclusion of examination proceedings. The text is communicated to the applicant by despatching a communication under Rule 71(3), in which the applicant is furthermore invited to pay the fee for grant and publishing (see C-V, 1.2) and to file a translation of the claims in the two official languages of the EPO other than the language of the proceedings (see C-V, 1.3) within a period of four months, which is non-extendable. If the applicant pays the fees and files the translations within this period (and files or requests no corrections or amendments to the text proposed for grant in the Rule 71(3) communication, see C-V, 4.1), he will be deemed to have approved the text intended for grant (Rule 71(5)).

If during examination proceedings a main and auxiliary requests have been filed (see C-IV, 1 and E-IX, 3) and one of the requests is allowable, the communication pursuant to Rule 71(3) is to be issued on the basis of the (first) allowable request and must be accompanied by an explanation of the reasons why the higher-ranking requests are not allowable (see also H-III, 3).

1.2 Grant and publishing fee

The communication under Rule 71(3) also invites the applicant to pay the fee for grant and publishing within the same non-extendable four-month period. Note that for European patent applications filed before 1 April 2009 and international applications entering the regional phase before that date the fee for grant and printing may include an element depending on the number of pages, but for applications filed or entering the regional phase on or after that date this additional element is payable as part of the filing fee (see A-III, 13.2).

1.3 Translations of the claims

The communication under Rule 71(3) also invites the applicant to file a translation of the claims in the two official languages of the EPO other than the language of the proceedings within the same non-extendable four-month period.

If the application contains different sets of claims for particular Contracting States (see H-III, 4), a translation of all the sets of claims must be filed.

Only one copy of the translation need be filed.

The examiner should not concern himself with the quality of the translation filed.

The translation should meet the requirements pursuant to Rule 50(1). *Rule 50(1)*

1.4 Claims fees due in response to Rule 71(3) communication

If the text of the European patent application serving as the basis for grant contains more than fifteen claims, the Examining Division requests the applicant to pay, within the period under Rule 71(3), claims fees in respect of each claim over and above that number, unless he has already done so under Rule 45(1) or Rule 162(1) and (2) (see A-III, 9). Where there is more than one set of claims, fees are incurred under Rule 45(1), Rule 162(1) and 162(2) or Rule 71(4) only for the set with the greatest number of claims.

Rule 71(4)
Rule 45(1)
Rule 162(1) and (2)

If the text on which the Rule 71(3) communication is based contains fewer claims than the set of claims in respect of which claims fees were paid on filing under Rule 45 or on entry into the European phase under Rule 162, no refund of claims fees will be made.

Where the communication under Rule 71(3) is based on an auxiliary request, it is the number of claims in that auxiliary request which determines the claims fees which are due in response to this communication. However, if the applicant then replies by requesting a grant based on a higher request, no claims fees need to be paid in response to that Rule 71(3) communication (see C-V, 4.1).

1.5 Other information in the communication under Rule 71(3)

In the communication under Rule 71(3), the applicant is asked whether he requests a paper copy of the patent specification to be supplied to him with the certificate for the European patent. This paper copy of the specification is supplied free of charge on request. For further details see C-V, 12.

Rule 74

An annex to the communication under Rule 71(3) states the Contracting States which have been validly designated, the title of the invention in the three EPO official languages, the international patent classification and the registered name of the applicant.

The communication under Rule 71(3) also states that, where a renewal fee falls due between the notification of this communication and the proposed date of publication of the mention of the grant, publication will be effected only after the renewal fee and any additional fee have been paid (see C-V, 2).

2. Grant of a patent

Rule 71(5)
Art. 97(1)

If the applicant pays the fee for grant and publishing and any claims fees due under Rule 71(4) and files the translation of the claims within the specified period (and files or requests no corrections or amendments to the text proposed for grant in the Rule 71(3) communication, see C-V, 4.1), he is deemed to have approved the text intended for grant.

The above also applies where the Rule 71(3) communication was based on an auxiliary request, provided that the applicant does not reply to the Rule 71(3) communication by requesting that a grant be based on a higher request. This means that, in the absence of any indication to the contrary, the above acts imply approval of the text of the auxiliary request upon which the Rule 71(3) communication was based as well as the abandonment of all higher requests.

The above also applies where the Rule 71(3) communication included proposals by the Examining Division for amendments or corrections of the text intended for grant (see C-V, 1.1). Consequently, provided the applicant does not reject these proposed amendments or corrections in his reply, the completion of the above acts constitutes approval of the text containing the amendments or corrections as proposed by the Examining Division.

Rule 71a(1)

Once all the requirements set out in C-V, 1.1 to 1.4, are met, the decision to grant the European patent is issued, provided that renewal fees and any additional fees already due have been paid.

Rule 71a(4)
Art. 86(1)

If a renewal fee becomes due after notification of the Rule 71(3) communication but before the next possible date for publication of the mention of the grant of the European patent, the decision to grant is not issued and the mention of the grant is not published until the renewal fee has been paid. The applicant is informed accordingly. If the renewal fee or any additional fee is not paid in time, the application is deemed to be withdrawn (see A-X, 5.2.4).

Rule 71a(3)

In the rare case that examination was accelerated to such an extent that the communication under Rule 71(3) is issued before the designation fee becomes due, the decision to grant will not be issued and the mention of the grant of the patent will not be published until the designation fee has been paid. The applicant is informed accordingly. For European patent applications filed before 1 April 2009 or international applications entering the regional phase before that date this publication will not take place until the designation fees have been paid and the designation of States for which no designation fees have been paid has been withdrawn (see also A-III, 11.1 and 11.3).

Art. 97(3)

The decision to grant does not take effect until the date on which the grant is mentioned in the European Patent Bulletin.

3. Application deemed withdrawn

If the applicant fails to pay the fee for grant and publishing or the claims fees or to file the translation in due time, the application is deemed to be withdrawn unless, within the period under Rule 71(3), the applicant files or requests corrections or amendments to the text proposed for grant in the Rule 71(3) communication (see C-V, 4.1).

Rule 71(7)

4. Amendments or corrections filed in reply to a Rule 71(3) communication

If the applicant, within the period under Rule 71(3), requests amendments or corrections to the communicated text which are reasoned (with regard to the reasoning required, see C-V, 4.3), the Examining Division will issue a new communication under Rule 71(3) if it gives its consent (i.e. if it finds the amendments admissible and allowable, see C-V, 4.6); otherwise it will resume the examination proceedings (see C-V, 4.7).

Rule 71(6)

In this and sections C-V, 4.1 to 4.10, unless otherwise stated, the terms "*amendment(s)*" and "*correction(s)*" refer only to amendments or corrections of the application documents and not of other documents (e.g. bibliographic data, the designation of the inventor, etc.).

4.1 No payment of fees or filing of translations necessary

In the case referred to in C-V, 4, the applicant will not be required to pay the fee for grant and publishing or any claims fees in reply to the first communication under Rule 71(3), nor will he be required to file any translations of the claims within this period. This applies irrespective of whether the Examining Division subsequently finds these amendments or corrections to be admissible and allowable and irrespective of whether the amendments or corrections are reasoned (see C-V, 4.3).

This also applies if the applicant requests the reversal of amendments proposed by the Examining Division in the Rule 71(3) communication (see C-V, 1.1). Furthermore, it also applies if the Rule 71(3) communication was based on an auxiliary request and the applicant replies by requesting that a grant be based on a higher request.

4.2 Crediting of fees paid voluntarily

Although the payment of fees in response to the Rule 71(3) communication is not required where the applicant files amendments or corrections in his response thereto (see C-V, 4.1), the applicant can still pay these fees voluntarily. If he does so, the amount of the fees paid will be credited to the payment of the same fees in response to a subsequent Rule 71(3) communication (issued either directly or after resumption of examination - see C-V, 4.6 and 4.7.2 respectively).

This crediting will be dealt with according to the procedures explained in A-X, 11. This is subject to the following exception: if the amount of the claims fees due in response to the second Rule 71(3) communication is less than the amount voluntarily paid in response to the first Rule 71(3) communication, a refund will be made of the excess

paid, since the higher claims fees were not due when paid in response to the first Rule 71(3) communication.

If, after such voluntary payment, the application is withdrawn, deemed to be withdrawn or refused, a refund of the voluntarily paid fee for grant and publishing will be possible under the conditions explained in A-X, 10.2.7. Furthermore, by way of exception, since the claims fees were paid when they were not due, these will also be refunded under the same conditions.

4.3 Amendments or corrections should be reasoned

The reasoning accompanying amendments or corrections filed in response to the Rule 71(3) communication should indicate respectively:

- why the applicant considers that the amended application documents comply with the EPC, in particular the requirements of patentability, Art. 123(2) and Art. 84;
- why the applicant considers that the errors and their proposed corrections are evident according to Rule 139.

If, within the period under Rule 71(3), the applicant files amendments or corrections which are **not** reasoned, no payment of the fee for grant and publishing or claims fees is necessary nor is the filing of translations (see C-V, 4.1). However, the lack of any reasoning means that such amendments or corrections are more likely to lead to a resumption of the examination procedure (see C-V, 4.7).

4.4 Admissibility of amendments

Rule 137(3)

The criteria for assessing the admissibility of such amendments are dealt with in detail in H-II, 2.5 and sub-sections.

By way of exception, in cases where the Rule 71(3) communication was also the first communication in examination proceedings, amendments filed in response thereto **must** be admitted into the proceedings under Rule 137 in cases (i) to (iii) mentioned in H-II, 2.2. However, where a **further** Rule 71(3) communication is sent in respect of such cases (see C-V, 4.6 and 4.7.2), any amendments filed in response thereto must be consented to by the Examining Division according to Rule 137(3) (see H-II, 2.5).

4.5 Adaptation of the description

If the amendments or corrections filed by the applicant in the Rule 71(3) period concern the claims, the applicant should consider whether this necessitates any adaptation of the description. In order to avoid potential delays in cases where adaptation is necessary, it is preferable for the applicant to provide an adapted description when filing amended claims in the Rule 71(3) period.

4.6 Amendments/corrections admitted and allowable - second Rule 71(3) communication sent

If the amendments and/or corrections filed within the period under Rule 71(3) are admitted under Rule 137(3) and also comply with the EPC, the Examining Division will send a second communication under Rule 71(3) based thereon. *Rule 71(6)*

4.6.1 Applicant rejects amendments proposed by Examining Division in first Rule 71(3) communication

A second communication under Rule 71(3) is also sent if the applicant requests reversal of amendments proposed by the Examining Division in the first communication under Rule 71(3) and the Examining Division overturns its previous opinion, finding that the amendments that it had proposed were not necessary, possibly as a consequence of argumentation or evidence provided by the applicant in his reply to the first Rule 71(3) communication (in the absence of such convincing argumentation or evidence, examination will normally be resumed, see C-V, 4.7).

4.6.2 Second Rule 71(3) invitation based on higher request initially rejected in first Rule 71(3) invitation

In cases where the first Rule 71(3) communication was based on an auxiliary request, the first communication under Rule 71(3) would have been accompanied by an explanation of why the higher requests were not considered to be allowable (see C-V, 1.1). If the applicant replies to this first Rule 71(3) communication indicating that he wishes a grant to be based on one of these higher requests which the Examining Division had previously held not to be allowable (see C-V, 1.1), such a request will normally lead to examination being resumed (see C-V, 4.7). The Examining Division may reverse its opinion, for example due to convincing argumentation or evidence filed by the applicant with his reply to the first Rule 71(3) communication. If the applicant is successful in this regard, the Examining Division will send a second communication under Rule 71(3) based on this higher request.

4.6.3 Examining Division proposes amendments in second Rule 71(3) communication

As with the first communication under Rule 71(3), the Examining Division may propose amendments to the applicant's latest request on which the second Rule 71(3) communication is based (this request includes amendments or corrections filed in response to the first Rule 71(3) communication). The types of amendment which may or may not be proposed by the Examining Division in the second Rule 71(3) communication are the same as those mentioned in C-V, 1.1. However, in the second communication under Rule 71(3), the Examining Division cannot re-propose amendments which were previously proposed and then rejected by the applicant. Where the Examining Division considers that such an amendment is necessary to overcome an objection, it should consider resuming examination (see C-V, 4.7).

4.7 Amendments not admitted and/or not allowable, examination resumed

Rule 71a(2)

Until the decision to grant the European patent, the Examining Division may resume the examination proceedings at any time. This applies *inter alia* when the applicant files non-allowable or inadmissible amendments in response to the Rule 71(3) communication.

4.7.1 Communications/oral proceedings after resumption

Art. 94(3)

Rule 71(1) and (2)

Where the grounds or evidence behind the finding of non-allowability or inadmissibility of the amendments have not yet been dealt with in examination proceedings, before issuing a summons to oral proceedings or a decision to refuse (see C-V, 4.7.3) the Examining Division will send a communication according to Art. 94(3) and Rule 71(1) and (2) explaining this finding.

Art. 116(1)

If one of the following situations applies, the Examining Division will have to appoint oral proceedings before issuing a decision to refuse (see C-V, 4.7.3):

- (i) oral proceedings have been requested, but have not yet been held, or
- (ii) oral proceedings have been held, but:
 - the subject of the proceedings has changed such that a right to subsequent oral proceedings arises under Art. 116(1) (e.g. as a result of the amendments filed in response to the Rule 71(3) communication), and
 - the applicant has requested subsequent oral proceedings.

If the grounds and evidence behind the finding of non-allowability or inadmissibility of the amendments have been dealt with in examination proceedings, but not yet in oral proceedings, a summons to oral proceedings can be issued directly, provided at least one communication under Art. 94(3) and Rule 71(1) and (2) has been issued.

Requests for oral proceedings must be allowed as long as proceedings before the EPO are still pending, i.e. until the decision to grant has been handed over to the internal post (see G 12/91 and T 556/95, especially reasons for the decision 4.4).

Art. 97(2)

If the following criteria are satisfied, the application may be refused directly:

- (i) the grounds and evidence behind the non-allowance or non-admittance of the request filed in response to the Rule 71(3) communication have already been dealt with in examination proceedings (Art. 113(1));

- (ii) the applicant has received at least one communication according to Art. 94(3) and Rule 71(1) and (2) (see C-III, 4); and
- (iii) the applicant's right to oral proceedings on request has been respected (Art. 116(1)).

4.7.2 Agreement reached on a text - second Rule 71(3) communication

If the resumption of examination described in C-V, 4.7.1, results in an allowable and admissible text being filed or results in the applicant convincing the Examining Division that the text already filed in response to the Rule 71(3) communication is in fact admissible and allowable, a second Rule 71(3) communication is sent based on this agreed text. Such cases are dealt with in the same way as described in C-V, 4.6.

Rule 71(6)

4.7.3 No agreement reached on a text - refusal

If, after resumption of examination, no agreement can be reached on a text, the application is refused (see C-V, 14). For details on conducting the resumed examination proceedings before issuing this decision, see C-V, 4.7.1.

Art. 97(2)

4.8 Fees to be paid within the second Rule 71(3) period

Where the applicant files amendments or corrections in response to the first communication under Rule 71(3), he does not have to pay either the fee for grant and publishing or the claims fees (see C-V, 4.1). A second Rule 71(3) communication may then be issued either immediately (where the amended/corrected text is allowable - see C-V, 4.6) or after examination is resumed and an allowable text is agreed on (see C-V, 4.7.2).

4.8.1 Claims fees

In order for the text on which the second Rule 71(3) communication is based to be deemed approved according to Rule 71(5), it is necessary for the applicant to pay any claims fees which are due in response to the communication, thus also avoiding deemed withdrawal of the application under Rule 71(7) (for the calculation of claims fees due at this stage see C-V, 1.4).

Since no claims fees would normally have been paid in response to the first Rule 71(3) communication, the number of claims in the text on which this first communication was based plays no role in calculating the amount of the claims fees due in response to the second Rule 71(3) communication. However, in cases where the applicant paid the claims fees voluntarily in response to the first Rule 71(3) communication, the amount paid is credited according to Rule 71a(5) (see C-V, 4.2 and A-X, 11.2).

4.8.2 Fee for grant and publishing

In order for the text on which the second Rule 71(3) communication is based to be deemed approved according to Rule 71(5), it is necessary for the applicant to pay the fee for grant and publishing in response to the communication, thus also avoiding deemed withdrawal of the application under Rule 71(7).

Art. 2(2), No 7.2 RFees

For European applications filed before 1 April 2009 or international applications entering the European phase before that date, the fee for grant and publishing incorporates a fee for each page of the application over and above 35 (see C-V, 1.2 and A-III, 13.2). If the number of pages of such an application changes between the first and the second Rule 71(3) communication, it is the number of pages on which the second Rule 71(3) communication is based which is used to calculate the amount of this fee. Where the applicant paid the fee voluntarily in response to the first Rule 71(3) communication, the amount paid will be credited according to Rule 71a(5) (see C-V, 4.2 and A-X, 11.1).

4.9 Applicant disapproves of the text proposed for grant

The applicant may reply to the communication under Rule 71(3) by simply disapproving of the text proposed therein and not paying any fees or filing the translations of the claims. In such cases, the application is not deemed to be withdrawn under Rule 71(7). Instead, if the following criteria are fulfilled, the application will be refused under Art. 97(2) for failure to comply with Art. 113(2), because there is no text agreed to by the applicant:

- (i) the Examining Division did not propose any amendments or corrections to the application in the communication under Rule 71(3),
- (ii) the Rule 71(3) communication was not based on an auxiliary request, and
- (iii) the applicant filed no amendments or corrections with his disapproval.

If the applicant has already been sent one communication in examination proceedings according to Art. 94(3) and Rule 71(1) and (2) (see C-III, 4 and E-VIII, 4.1) and his right to oral proceedings on request has been respected (Art. 116(1)), then the application can be refused directly without further communication with the applicant.

If criterion (i) is not met, the applicant's disapproval is interpreted as a rejection of the amendments or corrections proposed by the Examining Division in the Rule 71(3) communication. If criterion (ii) is not met, the applicant's disapproval is interpreted as a request to base a grant on a higher request. If criterion (iii) is not met, the applicant's disapproval is interpreted as a desire to proceed with the application as amended or corrected by him in response to the Rule 71(3) communication. If any of these criteria are not met, either examination is re-opened as

indicated in C-V, 4.7 or, if the applicant's submissions result in an allowable text, a second Rule 71(3) communication is sent (see C-V, 4.6). Where criterion (ii) is not met and it is not clear which higher request the applicant wishes to pursue, the Examining Division must request the applicant to clarify this in resumed examination proceedings.

4.10 Amendments/corrections filed in second Rule 71(3) period

In cases where a second Rule 71(3) communication is sent (see C-V, 4.6 and 4.7.2) and the applicant replies within this second Rule 71(3) period by doing one or more of the following, the procedures explained in C-V, 4.1 to 4.9 apply *mutatis mutandis*:

- (i) filing further amendments or corrections,
- (ii) rejecting amendments proposed by the Examining Division in the second Rule 71(3) communication, or
- (iii) reverting to a higher-ranking request (where the second Rule 71(3) communication is based on an auxiliary request).

In particular, in such cases the applicant will not be required to pay the fee for grant and publishing or any claims fees, nor will he be required to file translations of the claims within this second period under Rule 71(3). If the Examining Division agrees to a text (either with or without resumption of examination), a third communication under Rule 71(3) is then sent.

Furthermore, if the applicant replies to the second Rule 71(3) communication by rejecting amendments proposed by the Examining Division in the first Rule 71(3) communication (where these have not been superseded), the procedures described in C-V, 4.1 to 4.9 likewise apply *mutatis mutandis* (no need to pay fees or file translations etc).

5. Further requests for amendment after approval

The criteria for assessing the admissibility of such amendments are dealt with in detail in H-II, 2.6. The procedure for dealing with such late-filed amendments is explained in C-V, 6.

Rule 137(3)

6. The Examining Division resumes examination after approval of the text

6.1 When does the Examining Division resume examination after approval?

Subsequent to the applicant's approval in response to the Rule 71(3) communication (see C-V, 2), the Examining Division may resume the examination procedure at any time up to the moment the decision to grant is handed over to the EPO's internal postal service for transmittal to the applicant (see G 12/91). This will seldom occur, but may be necessary if e.g. the applicant files further prior art which necessitates

Rule 71a(2)

further substantive examination, if the Examining Division becomes aware of very relevant prior art following observations by third parties under Art. 115, if the applicant files amendments or corrections (having already approved the text), or if the Examining Division becomes aware in some other way of circumstances which are such as to cause the subject-matter claimed to fail to comply with the EPC.

The resumption of examination after approval is subject to the same considerations as where examination is resumed due to amendments filed in the Rule 71(3) period (see C-V, 4.7.1). In particular, the applicant's right to comment (Art. 113(1)), his right to at least one communication under Art. 94(3) and Rule 71(1) and (2) in examination proceedings (see C-III, 4) and his right to oral proceedings on request (Art. 116(1)) must be respected.

Rule 137(3)

The criteria applied in assessing the admissibility of amendments or corrections filed by the applicant after approval are dealt with in H-II, 2.6.

6.2 A further communication under Rule 71(3)

Rule 71(6)

A second Rule 71(3) communication is sent out if the resumed examination results in a text on the basis of which a patent can be granted (substantive amendments directed to resolving the issues which gave rise to the resumption of examination are possible).

6.3 Crediting of fees under Rule 71a(5)

Rule 71a(5)

If, in response to an invitation under Rule 71(3), the applicant has already paid the fee for grant and publishing or the claims fees, the amount paid shall be credited if a further such invitation is issued. For more details on this procedure, see A-X, 11.

7. Correction of errors in the decision to grant

Under certain circumstances, a decision to grant a European patent may be corrected. For more details see H-VI, 5.

8. Further processing

Art. 121

If the applicant overruns the time limit set under Rule 71(3), he may request further processing under Art. 121 (see E-VII, 2.1). The omitted act in respect of this further processing request is either:

- (i) completion of all of the following acts referred to in Rule 71(3) and (4):
 - (a) payment of the fee for grant and publishing,
 - (b) payment of any claims fees due, and
 - (c) filing of the translations of the claims; or

- (ii) completion of one or more of the following acts:
 - (a) filing amendments and/or corrections to the application documents,
 - (b) rejecting amendments proposed by the Examining Division in the communication under Rule 71(3), or
 - (c) requesting a grant to be based on a higher request with respect to the auxiliary request on which the Rule 71(3) communication was based.

9. Refund of the fee for grant and publishing

If the application is refused, withdrawn prior to notification of the decision on the grant of a European patent or, at that time, deemed to be withdrawn, the fee for grant and publishing shall be refunded (for more details see A-X, 10.2.7).

Rule 71a(6)

10. Publication of the patent specification

The decision to grant contains the date of the mention of the grant of the European patent and is sent to the applicant when the technical preparations for printing the patent specification have been completed.

As soon as possible after the mention of the grant is published in the Bulletin, the EPO publishes the patent specification containing the description, claims (in the three official languages) and any drawings. The front page of the published specification shows *inter alia* the Contracting States which are still designated at the time of grant (or the designation of which has been withdrawn after completion of the technical preparations for printing). With regard to the form in which the publication takes place, see the Decision of the President of the EPO dated 12 July 2007, Special edition No. 3, OJ EPO 2007, D.3.

Art. 98

Rule 73

Art. 14(6)

Mistakes in the specification of a European patent arising in the course of its production have no effect on the content of the patent granted. For this, only the text on which the decision to grant the patent is based is decisive (see H-VI, 3). If necessary, the Office may arrange for correction to be made public as soon as any mistake in a specification is discovered. This is done by means of a note in the European Patent Bulletin and publication of a corrigendum, the sole purpose being to bring the specification into line with the content of the decision to grant (see Rule 143(2) and the Decision of the President of the EPO dated 14 October 2009, OJ EPO 2009, 598, Art. 1, point 2).

11. Withdrawal before publication of the patent specification

The specification of the European patent is not published if the application is withdrawn before termination of the technical preparations for publication. If after termination of the technical preparations the application is withdrawn to avoid publication, non-publication cannot be guaranteed. The EPO will, however, try (in accordance with the principles of J 5/81) to prevent publication on a

Rule 73

case-by-case basis if the stage reached in the publication procedure permits this reasonably easily. The application may be withdrawn by means of a signed declaration, which should be unqualified and unambiguous (see J 11/80). The applicant is bound by an effective declaration of withdrawal (see J 25/03, J 4/97; and J 10/87).

12. Certificate

Rule 74

As soon as the European patent specification has been published, the EPO issues the proprietor with a certificate attesting that the European patent has been granted to the person named in the certificate. Where there is more than proprietor, each of them is issued with a certificate. Upon special request filed within the time limit of Rule 71(3) a copy of the patent specification is attached to the certificate. The proprietor may also request that a duplicate copy of the certificate with the specification attached be supplied to him upon payment of an administrative fee. For further details see the Decision of the President of the EPO dated 12 July 2007 (Special edition No. 3, OJ EPO 2007, D.2).

13. European Patent Bulletin

Art. 129(a)

If no notice of opposition is recorded in the dossier of the European patent within nine months of publication of the mention of grant, the patent proprietor is informed and an appropriate entry is published in the European Patent Bulletin (point 1, Art. 1, Decision of the President of the EPO dated 14 October 2009, OJ EPO 2009, 598). If, subsequently, it emerges that an opposition was filed in time, the proprietor is again informed and a correction is published in the Bulletin.

14. Refusal

Art. 97(2)

Art. 113(1)

Rule 111

Art. 109

Art. 111(1) and (2)

If, despite the applicant's submissions, i.e. amendments or counter-arguments, objections persist after the applicant's reply to the first communication under Art. 94(3) in examination, then even at this stage a refusal can be issued (subject to oral proceedings being held, if these are requested). In the event that refusal is contemplated at this or any later stage of examination proceedings, the examiner should bring the application before the other members of the Examining Division, which may then decide to refuse the application. In any event, at some stage, the primary examiner will consult the other members of the Examining Division with a view to establishing whether the application should be refused or a patent should be granted. If the Division intends to refuse the application, a written reasoned decision is necessary and this will normally be prepared by the primary examiner (see E-IX, 4 and 5). In preparing the decision, the examiner must take care to abide by the general principles set out in Art. 113(1), i.e. the decision must be based on grounds or evidence on which the applicant has had the opportunity to comment (see E-IX, 1.1 and 1.2).

In addition, the applicant's attention must be directed to the provisions for appeal laid down in Art. 106 to 108. If oral proceedings take place (see E-II), the decision may be given orally but must subsequently be notified in writing, the time limit for appeal then running from the date of such notification.

If the applicant appeals against the decision and the Examining Division considers, in the light of the applicant's statement, that the appeal is admissible and well-founded, it should rectify its decision accordingly within three months after receipt of the statement of grounds. Otherwise, the appeal will be considered by a Board of Appeal. If a decision to refuse a patent is reversed on appeal, the application may be referred back to the Examining Division for further examination. In such a case, the further examination will normally be entrusted to the examiner who performed the original examination. The Examining Division is bound by the *ratio decidendi* of the Board of Appeal, insofar as the facts are the same.

15. Decision according to the state of the file

A special case is where the applicant does not file comments or amendments in reply to the examiner's communication but requests a decision "according to the state of the file" or "on the file as it stands", meaning that the applicant wishes to close the debate and a decision is taken on the basis of the current status of the application and any supporting arguments. The decision, which may be appealed, may only be based on grounds and evidence on which the applicant has had an opportunity to present his comments (Art. 113(1)).

15.1 The request for a decision according to the state of the file

An applicant may file a request for a decision according to the state of the file at any stage during examination proceedings, provided that at least one communication in examination has been sent (see also C-V, 15.4). The request should be explicit and unambiguous, preferably using the wording "according to the state of the file" or "on the file as it stands".

If the request is not clear in this respect, the examiner should solve the ambiguity with an enquiry to the applicant.

A request for a decision according to the state of the file does not imply the withdrawal of a pending request for oral proceedings. Consequently, when filing a request for such a decision, it is recommended that the applicant also withdraws any pending request for oral proceedings (conditional or otherwise). If the applicant does not do so, the examiner will request him to clarify in writing that he withdraws his request for oral proceedings before a decision according to the state of the file can be issued.

15.2 Decision by means of a standard form

The examiner may be in a position to refuse the application using a standard form referring to the previous communication. In order to comply with the requirement that such a decision be reasoned (Rule 111(2)), this is only possible where the previous communication properly identifies the application documents on file and is well-reasoned and complete with respect to the grounds and the reasons for the refusal of the current request. A further condition is that no new arguments or amendments have been submitted by the applicant since the previous communication.

Although it is possible by way of exception to refer to more than one communication in the standard form, the examiner should carefully consider the requirements of Rule 111(2). In particular, if the different communications deal with different sets of claims, such that it is not clear which of the reasons given by the Examining Division in its communications might be essential to the decision to refuse, a fully reasoned decision should be issued instead (see C-V, 15.3).

15.3 Issuing a self-contained decision

If the conditions set out in C-V, 15.2 are not met, it is necessary to issue a self-contained decision to refuse in order to comply with Rule 111(2). This is necessary, for example, where the numerous objections raised in the previous communications with respect to different sets of claims render unclear the grounds and the reasons for the refusal. This also applies if the applicant has made further submissions (including amendments) since the previous communication, where these do not cause the subsequent decision to be based on grounds or evidence on which the applicant has not had the opportunity to present his comments. In all cases, the requirements of Art. 113(1) should be carefully considered (see also E-IX, 1).

15.4 Issuing a further communication (no refusal)

If it appears that the previous communications were insufficiently reasoned or incomplete, or if the applicant has filed amendments and/or arguments since the previous communication, the examiner should carefully consider Art. 113(1) and Rule 111(2) before issuing a refusal (see E-IX, 1). A further communication may have to be issued with sufficient reasoning, unless oral proceedings are to be held (see E-II, 2), in which case the reasoning would be given in the summons (Rule 116(1)). In the communication or summons the applicant should be informed that his request for a decision according to the state of the file could not be followed.

Chapter VI – Time limits and acceleration of examination

1. Time limits for response to communications from the examiner

1.1 General considerations

The general considerations relating to time limits are set out in E-VII. The time limit for response to a communication from the examiner should in general be between two and four months in accordance with Rule 132. The period to be allowed will be determined by the examiner taking all the factors relevant to the particular application into account. These include the language normally used by the applicant or his representative; the number and nature of the objections raised; the length and technical complexity of the application; the proximity of the EPO to the applicant or, if he has one, his representative; and the distance separating applicant and representative.

This time limit can be extended if the applicant so requests before it expires (see E-VII, 1.6). Failure to respond to a communication according to Art. 94(3) and Rule 71(1) and (2) in time results in the application being deemed to be withdrawn. This loss of rights is subject to further processing (see E-VII, 2.1).

*Art. 94(1) and (4)
Rule 132*

1.2 Special circumstances

In certain special circumstances the examiner may allow up to six months for the time limit. The six-month period may be appropriate, for instance, if the applicant resides a long way from his representative and the language of the proceedings is not one to which the applicant is accustomed; or if the subject-matter of the application or the objections raised are exceptionally complicated (for more information see E-VII, 1.2).

The search opinion is not a communication under Art. 94(3).

2. PACE

With a written request for accelerated examination under the programme for accelerated prosecution of European patent applications (PACE), the applicant can speed up the proceedings at the examination stage (see Notice from the EPO dated 4 May 2010, OJ EPO 2010, 352, and E-VII, 3.2).

3. Further ways to accelerate examination

Where the applicant files a request for examination before the search report is transmitted to him, he may also dispense with the need to comply with the invitation pursuant to Rule 70(2), and file a categorical request for examination whatever the result of the search may be, by which the procedure can also be accelerated (see Notice from the EPO dated 4 May 2010, OJ EPO 2010, 352). In this case, confirmation that he desires to proceed further with his application is deemed to be given

*Rule 70(2)
Art. 11(b) RFees
Rule 62(1)*

when the search report is transmitted to him, so that in accordance with Rule 62(1) the search report is not accompanied by a search opinion. Under these circumstances, if the application is not in order for grant, a communication under Art. 94(3) and Rule 71(1) and (2) is transmitted to the applicant. If the application is in order for grant, the subsequent procedure will depend on whether or not it is possible at that time to carry out the search for conflicting European applications according to Art. 54(3) (see C-IV, 7.1 and B-XI, 7). If that search can be carried out, and assuming that it does not identify any conflicting applications, then the communication under Rule 71(3) is transmitted to the applicant. If it cannot yet be carried out, then the communication from the examining division will be postponed until the said search is completed and the applicant will be informed accordingly. If the European patent application is subsequently withdrawn before the substantive examination has begun, 75% of the examination fee will be refunded (for more details see A-VI, 2.5).

The applicant can also accelerate the processing of Euro-PCT applications by waiving his right to the communications under Rule 161 and Rule 162 (see E-VIII, 3.1).

Chapter VII – Other procedures in examination

1. General remark

In this Chapter the term "applicant" is intended to mean "representative" where he has appointed one. Where the applicant has appointed a representative, the procedures described in this Chapter should be conducted with that representative.

2. Telephone conversation, personal interview, e-mail

2.1 Request for an interview; arranging an interview

The circumstances in which it may be appropriate for the examiner to communicate with the applicant by telephone or propose an interview rather than send a further written action are considered in C-IV, 3. If the applicant requests an interview, the request should be granted unless the examiner believes that no useful purpose would be served by such a discussion. With regard to the issue of telephone conversations and personal interviews in response to the EESR, before the application has entered the examination phase, see B-XI, 8.

When an interview is arranged, whether by telephone, by e-mail or in writing, and whether by the examiner or the applicant, the matters for discussion should be stated. If the arrangement is made by telephone, the examiner should record the particulars and briefly indicate, in the file, the matters to be discussed.

2.2 Persons attending the interview

The interviewee must be a person entitled to act for the applicant before the EPO. If the applicant is a natural or legal person having his residence or place of business in a contracting state, interviews may only be conducted with:

- (a) the applicant (see A-VIII, 1.1),
- (b) a professional representative (see A-VIII, 1.1) or
- (c) a duly authorised employee of the applicant (see A-VIII, 1.2) or, to the extent defined in Art. 134(8), a legal practitioner (see A-VIII, 1.4).

Regarding (c), see also A-VIII, 1.5.

If the applicant is a natural or legal person having neither residence nor place of business in a contracting state, interviews may only be conducted with:

- a professional representative (see A-VIII, 1.1) or
- a legal practitioner (see A-VIII, 1.4 and 1.5).

Unless he is already known personally to the examiner conducting the interview, the person taking part in the interview must produce an official identity document.

The person entitled to act before the EPO, i.e. one of the persons listed above, may be accompanied by other persons, whose identity does not need to be checked. On request of the person entitled to act, such other persons may be allowed to take part in the interview if their participation is relevant to the proceedings.

From the Examining Division, only the examiner dealing with the case will normally be present. However, there is no objection to one or even both of the other members of the Examining Division participating in the interview.

However, the applicant or representative does not have the right to demand that additional members of the Examining Division be present. If a request is made for an interview with all three members, it will usually be advisable to appoint oral proceedings instead.

2.3 Conduct of an interview or telephone conversation

The interview will normally be conducted solely by the examiner dealing with the application. It is not a formal procedure (for formal oral proceedings before the Examining Division, see E-II), and the minuting of the interview depends upon the nature of the matters under discussion (see C-VII, 2.5). It should always be made clear to the applicant that any agreement reached must ultimately be subject to the views of the other members of the Examining Division.

If a fresh objection of substance is raised at an interview and no amendment to meet it is agreed at the time, the objection must be confirmed by a communication of the minutes thereof, giving the applicant a fresh period within which to reply.

When the telephone is used to settle outstanding matters, the normal procedure should be for the examiner to telephone the applicant stating the number of the application he wishes to discuss and requesting the applicant to telephone back at a specified time. A note must be made in the minutes, giving particulars and identifying the matters discussed and any agreements reached. Any matters on which agreement was not reached should also be noted and the arguments adduced by the applicant should be summarised.

2.4 Effect of statements made in an interview or by telephone

Oral statements made by telephone or at an interview must be confirmed in writing in order to be procedurally effective. Indeed, such statements are not normally legally binding. Such a statement cannot, for instance, be effective to meet a time limit (see, however, C-VII, 2.5). For the purpose of the European grant procedure, except in oral proceedings, only written statements are effective and only from the date on which they are received by the Office. Where appropriate, the

applicant/representative should therefore be advised to submit his observations or amendments in writing.

2.5 Minutes of an interview or telephone conversation

Where the interview is concerned with the clarification of obscurities, the resolution of uncertainties, or putting the application in order by clearing up a number of minor points it will usually be sufficient if the examiner makes a note in the minutes of the matters discussed and the conclusions reached or amendments agreed. If, however, the interview is concerned with resolving weightier matters, such as questions of novelty, inventive step, unity or whether the amendment introduces fresh subject-matter, then a fuller note of the matters discussed should be made in the minutes (see below).

The minutes should list the participants, summarise the main results and state any oral requests. They must be signed by the examiner. Documents filed during a personal interview, such as new claims or an amended description, must be listed in the minutes and signed by the applicant/representative.

With regard to weightier matters which are discussed, it should always be the aim when drafting the minutes to specify in concrete terms the topics discussed, together with any amendments agreed, any opposing views, the reasons for any change of opinion and any conclusions drawn, unless these are clear from other documents in the dossier. In particular, the reasons for any amendments required by the examiner should be clearly indicated.

The use of indefinite, ambiguous or universally applicable statements in minutes should be avoided. For example, statements such as "Amendments to the claims were proposed to take account of the prior art cited in the search report" are of no assistance to members of the public, other members of the Division, or indeed the primary examiner himself at later stages of the procedure. The same applies to conclusions worded in a generalised manner.

In every case the minutes of an interview or telephone consultation should be placed in the dossier and a copy communicated to the applicant or his representative to notify him, even where a telephone consultation merely changes/confirms/cancels the time/date of a proposed interview. However, by way of exception, telephone consultations relating to amendments agreed immediately preceding completion of the communication according to Rule 71(3) may be minuted in that communication, provided that there is no uncertainty for the public as to what was agreed. The amendments must be identified as exactly as possible.

The minutes of interviews or telephone conversations should always indicate whether the next action is due to come from the applicant or the examiner. The minutes when dispatched to the applicant may:

- (i) be dispatched for information only, in which case if a time limit is still running, it should be observed; if no time limit is running, no action is required from the applicant;
- (ii) be dispatched such as to extend a running time limit, in which case the applicant must reply within that extended time limit, or
- (iii) be dispatched such as to set a new time limit for response, in which case the applicant must reply within this new time limit.

However, a time limit may only be set in connection with the dispatch of minutes of an interview or telephone consultation if a communication from the Examining Division has been issued. Otherwise the minutes must be sent as an annex to a first communication according to Art. 94(3).

Where an objection of a lack of unity is raised for the first time in the telephone call or interview, notification of the minutes may trigger the period for mandatory division according to Rule 36(1)(b) (for more details see A-IV, 1.1.1.3).

2.6 Use of e-mail

At present, e-mail has no legal force in proceedings under the EPC and thus cannot be used to validly perform any procedural act and, in particular, cannot be used to comply with time limits (see OJ EPO 2000, 458 and A-VIII, 2.5, in connection with Rule 2 and Rule 127).

The above OJ notice also stresses the importance of ensuring that any exchange of information is duly documented on file and that confidentiality issues should be carefully considered.

2.6.1 Examples of where e-mail could be used

Typical examples where e-mail could be useful are:

- (i) arranging a date for an interview
- (ii) if during a telephone consultation particular amendments to claims are being discussed the applicant might want to communicate these immediately, i.e. during the consultation to the examiner for easier discussion
- (iii) shortly before oral proceedings: sending an electronic copy of amended claims in addition to the official submission made e.g. by fax; this would ensure that the examining division gets the documents well in time for preparation of the oral proceedings.

E-mails cannot replace an official communication under Art. 94(3).

2.6.2 Initiation of e-mail

Neither the examiner nor the applicant should use e-mail without having previously agreed to this, e.g. during a telephone consultation. There must be mutual agreement between the examiner and the applicant to such use. Furthermore, the mere fact that an e-mail address is indicated on a letter head does not mean that the examiner can simply use such an e-mail address for file-related topics.

If, on the other hand, an examiner receives an e-mail from an applicant concerning procedural requests or addressing any substantive issues without previous agreement, such an e-mail cannot simply be ignored but must be dealt with, ensuring that the content is put in the official file (see also T 599/06); it is recommended that such an e-mail be replied to with the clear message that e-mail is not an official means of communication and that any requests should be filed by permitted means (see A-II, 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3).

2.6.3 Confidentiality

For non-published applications, confidentiality issues should be carefully considered and substantive matters should not form part of any e-mail correspondence concerning such applications.

2.6.4 Filing of amended documents and new requests

As stated above, e-mail cannot be used to perform procedural acts. If, e.g. shortly before oral proceedings, the applicant would like to submit new requests and/or amended documents, this should be done by fax, since only this ensures that the filed documents are given a valid date of receipt and form part of the file. Experience has shown that faxes are normally visible in the electronic file on the same day. As stated above, an informal copy, in addition to the fax, can be sent to the examiner for the convenience of the Division if this is felt necessary due to the short time frame.

2.6.5 Inclusion in the file of any e-mail exchange

If e-mail is used, it is essential to ensure that the exchange of e-mails is properly documented in the file. This should be done by minuting the e-mail exchange (including data relating to addressee and date) and sending this to the applicant for information with no time limit. This ensures that the exchange is included in the public part of the file and that the applicant is aware of this.

3. Taking of evidence

3.1 General remark

The general considerations relating to the taking of evidence are set out in E-III. This section deals only with the kind of evidence most likely to arise in pre-grant proceedings, viz. written evidence.

3.2 Producing evidence

An Examining Division would not, as a general rule, require evidence to be produced. The primary function of the examiner in proceedings before grant is to point out to the applicant any ways in which the application does not meet the requirements of the EPC. If the applicant does not accept the view of the examiner, then it is for the applicant to decide whether he wishes to produce evidence in support of his case and, if so, what form that evidence should take. The Examining Division should afford the applicant a reasonable opportunity of producing any evidence which is likely to be relevant.

However, this opportunity should not be given where the Examining Division is convinced that no useful purpose would be served by it, or that undue delay would result.

3.3 Written evidence

Written evidence could include the supply of information, or the production of a document or of a sworn statement. To take some examples:

To rebut an allegation by the examiner of lack of inventive step, the applicant might supply information as to the technical advantages of the invention. Again he might produce a sworn statement, either from himself or from an independent witness, purporting to show that workers in the art have been trying for a long time unsuccessfully to solve the problem with which the invention is concerned, or that the invention is a completely new departure in the relevant art.

4. Oral proceedings

The general considerations relating to oral proceedings are set out in E-II.

5. Examination of observations by third parties

The general considerations relating to observations from third parties are set out in E-V, 3.

Chapter VIII – Work within the Examining Division

1. General remarks

An Examining Division will normally consist of three technical examiners. However, within the Examining Division made responsible for the application, one member (the primary examiner) will, as a general rule, be entrusted to carry out all the work up to the point of a decision to grant a patent or refuse the application. This means that this examiner is entrusted to act on behalf of the Examining Division in all communications with the applicant up to that point, but he may confer informally with the other members of the Division at any time if a special point of doubt or difficulty arises. Where reference is made in this Part C of the Guidelines to the "examiner", this normally means the primary examiner, and it should be understood that this primary examiner is always acting in the name of the Examining Division. This examiner is normally the examiner who drafted the search report. *Art. 18(2)*

As stated above, the examiner may seek the advice of other members of the Examining Division, if necessary, at any stage in the examination. However, a point will be reached when it becomes appropriate for the examiner to refer the case formally to the other members of the Examining Division. This will arise if he considers the case is in order to proceed to grant or, alternatively, where there seems no possibility of amendment which would overcome his objections or where the applicant has not overcome these objections, and the examiner considers the case is in order to proceed to refusal. There are also other circumstances in which reference to the Examining Division is appropriate, e.g. oral proceedings may be suggested by the examiner or requested by the applicant because an impasse has been reached. In considering whether to refer the application to the Division, the examiner should be guided by the principle stated in C-IV, 3.

The primary examiner should also bear in mind that when he issues a communication he does so in the name of the Division, and applicants are entitled to assume that if the examiner had doubts as to the views of the rest of the Division he would have discussed the matter with them beforehand.

As soon as the application has passed to the Examining Division under Rule 10, that Division will have ultimate responsibility, but formal matters will normally be dealt with by a formalities officer (see the Decision of the President of the EPO dated 12 July 2007, Special edition No. 3, OJ EPO 2007, F.2; the Decision of the President of the EPO dated 31 August 2009, OJ EPO 2009, 478; and the Decision of the President of the EPO dated 11 May 2010, OJ EPO 2010, 350). The examiner should not spend time checking the work done by the Receiving Section or the formalities officer, but if he believes a formalities report is incorrect or incomplete he should refer the application to the formalities officer for further consideration.

2. Recommendation to grant

If the examiner considers that the application satisfies the requirements of the EPC and is thus in order to proceed to grant, he should make a brief written report (the "votum"). As a general rule, it will be appropriate in this report for the examiner to give the reasons why, in his opinion, the subject-matter as claimed in the application is not obvious having regard to the state of the art. He should normally comment on the document reflecting the nearest prior art and the features of the claimed invention which make it patentable, although there may be exceptional circumstances where this is not necessary, e.g. where patentability is based on a surprising effect. He should also indicate how any apparently obscure but important points have ultimately been clarified, and if there are any borderline questions which the examiner has resolved in favour of the applicant he should draw attention specifically to these.

3. Recommendation to refuse

When referring to the Examining Division an application which is not in order for grant of a patent, the examiner should confer with the other members of the Division, bringing to their attention the points at issue, summarising the case history to the extent necessary to enable the other members to obtain a quick grasp of the essential facts, and recommending the action to be taken, e.g. refusal, or grant conditional upon certain further amendments. As the other members will need to study the case themselves, there is no need for a detailed exposition. It will be useful, however, to draw attention to any unusual features or to points not readily apparent from the documents themselves. If the examiner recommends refusal and the issue seems clear-cut, he may already provide a draft reasoned decision for issue by the Examining Division (see C-V, 14); if the issue is not clear-cut, the drafting of the reasoned decision should be deferred until the Division has discussed the case.

4. Tasks of the other members of the Examining Division

When an application is referred to the other members of the Division, they will first consider the case individually and each will indicate his opinion on the course of action to be taken. If there is complete agreement with the recommendation of the primary examiner, no further consultation of the Division will be necessary. When further action is needed, the primary examiner will be entrusted with the work. If, however, there is not complete agreement immediately with the primary examiner, or at least one member of the Division wishes to discuss the case further, further consultation of the Division will be arranged. In such discussions, the Division should try to reach a unanimous opinion, but where this seems unlikely, the difference of opinion must be resolved by voting. When the Division is enlarged to four members (see C-VIII, 7), the chairman has a casting vote should this be necessary.

Art. 18(2)

The other members of the Examining Division should bear in mind that their function generally is not to perform a complete re-examination of the application. If, following a discussion, the conclusions of the examiner entrusted with the examination are generally considered to be reasonable, the other members should accept them.

5. Further communication with the applicant

If, in the opinion of the Examining Division, the possibility exists of amending the application to bring it into a form which meets the requirements of the EPC, then the primary examiner should be entrusted with the task of informing the applicant that the Examining Division is of the opinion that the application should be refused on certain grounds unless satisfactory amendments are submitted within a stated period (see C-VI, 1). If, within the time limit, satisfactory amendments are made, the examiner will then report back to the Examining Division recommending that the application should proceed to grant. If not, he should report back recommending refusal.

6. Decision

Any decision is issued by the Examining Division as a whole and not by an individual examiner. All members, therefore, sign the written decision irrespective of whether or not it was a unanimous one. A seal may replace the signature.

Rule 113

7. Enlargement of the Examining Division; consultation of a legally qualified examiner

If the Examining Division considers that the nature of the decision so requires, it is enlarged by the addition of a legally qualified examiner.

Art. 18(2)

The participation of a legally qualified examiner or at least internal consultation of Directorate Patent Law, the department responsible for providing legally qualified members for Examining and Opposition Divisions, will be required if a difficult legal question arises which has not yet been solved by the Guidelines or by jurisprudence.

If the Examining Division has been enlarged by the addition of a legally qualified examiner, it consists of four members. In this case, in the event of parity of votes, the vote of the chairman will be decisive. As a rule, this enlargement of the Examining Division will be required in cases where evidence has to be taken according to Rule 117 (including the giving of evidence by witnesses - see E-III). The addition of a legally qualified examiner is to be considered also in the case of oral proceedings. Such enlargement will also be necessary in cases involving technical opinions (Art. 25 - see E-XI, 3.1).

Depending on the nature of the problem, as an alternative to the enlargement of the Examining Division, internal consultation of a legally qualified examiner in Directorate Patent Law may take place. For instance, doubts may arise whether an application concerns an invention within the meaning of Art. 52(2) or whether the claimed invention is excluded from patentability by virtue of Art. 53.

Consultation of a legally qualified examiner may also be appropriate in cases where legal considerations are predominant in respect to a decision, as in proceedings following a request for re-establishment of rights according to Art. 122. The formalities officer may also consult Directorate Patent Law in cases within the scope of the duties transferred to him according to Rule 11(3) (see the Decision of the President of the EPO dated 12 July 2007, Special edition No. 3, OJ EPO 2007, F.2; the Decision of the President of the EPO dated 31 August 2009, OJ EPO 2009, 478; and the Decision of the President of the EPO dated 11 May 2010, OJ EPO 2010, 350).

Chapter IX – Special applications

1. Divisional applications (see also A-IV, 1)

1.1 General remarks

Subsequent to the filing of a European application, a divisional application may be filed. The divisional application is accorded the same filing date as the parent application and has the benefit of any right of priority of the parent application in respect of the subject-matter contained in the divisional application. A European application may give rise to more than one divisional application. A divisional application may itself give rise to one or more divisional applications. *Art. 76(1)*

1.2 Voluntary and mandatory division

The applicant may file a divisional application of his own volition (voluntary division). The most common reason, however, for filing a divisional application is to meet an objection under Art. 82 due to lack of unity of invention (mandatory division). If the examiner raises an objection due to lack of unity, the applicant is allowed a period (see C-VI, 1) in which to limit his application to a single invention. The limitation of the parent application has to be clear and unconditional. The communication inviting the applicant to limit the application due to lack of unity should therefore include a reference to the fact that if the application is not limited within the set time limit the application may be refused. *Art. 82*

1.3 Time limit; abandonment of subject matter

For a divisional application to be validly filed, the following requirements must be met on the date when the divisional application is filed: *Rule 36(1)*

- (i) the parent application must be pending (see, however, A-IV, 1.1.1.1), and
- (ii) at least one of the periods according to Rule 36(1)(a) and (b) must not yet have expired (see A-IV, 1.1.1.2 and 1.1.1.3).

An application is pending up to (but **not** including) the date on which the European Patent Bulletin mentions the grant of the patent (see OJ EPO 2002, 112). Where the application is refused, it is pending within the meaning of Rule 36(1) during the period for filing the notice of appeal, irrespective of whether any appeal is filed (see G 1/09). For further details, see A-IV, 1.1.1 and sub-sections.

Where a first communication according to Art. 94(3) and Rule 71(1) and (2) was based on the wrong application documents, notification of this communication does *not* start the period for voluntary division according to Rule 36(1)(a). This might happen, for example, where the applicant amended the application in response to the ESOP (see B-XI, 9 and C-II, 3.1) but the Examining Division

erroneously failed to take these amendments into account when drafting the first communication. The incorrect communication will be withdrawn and a new first communication will be issued by the EPO, the notification of which starts the period under Rule 36(1)(a). The applicant will be informed of this by the EPO.

The mere deletion of subject-matter in the parent application is not prejudicial to the later filing of a divisional application. When deleting subject-matter, the applicant should, however, avoid any statements which could be interpreted as abandonment with substantive effect, thereby impeding the valid filing of a divisional application for that subject-matter (see also H-III, 2.5, last paragraph).

1.4 Examination of a divisional application

Art. 76(1)

The substantive examination of a divisional application should in principle be carried out as for any other application but the following special points need to be considered. The claims of a divisional application need not be limited to subject-matter already claimed in claims of the parent application. Furthermore, no abuse of the system of divisional applications can be identified in the mere fact that the claims of the application on which the Examining Division had then to decide had a broader scope than the claims granted in relation with the parent application (see T 422/07).

However, under Art. 76(1), the subject-matter may not extend beyond the content of the parent application as filed. If a divisional application as filed contains subject-matter additional to that contained in the parent application as filed, it can be amended later in order that its subject-matter no longer extends beyond the earlier content, even at a time when the earlier application is no longer pending (see G 1/05). If the applicant is unwilling to remedy the defect by removal of that additional subject-matter, the divisional application must be refused under Art. 97(2) due to non-compliance with Art. 76(1).

It cannot be converted into an independent application taking its own filing date. Moreover, a further divisional application for this additional subject-matter should also be refused under Art. 97(2) due to non-compliance with Art. 76(1).

Art. 123(2)

Amendments made to a divisional application subsequent to its filing must comply with the requirements of Art. 123(2), i.e. they may not extend the subject-matter beyond the content of the divisional application as filed (see G 1/05 and T 873/94). If those amendments have not been identified and/or their basis in the application as filed not indicated by the applicant (see H-III, 2.1) and the application is one of those mentioned in H-III, 2.1.4, the Examining Division may send a communication according to Rule 137(4) requesting the applicant to provide this information (see H-III, 2.1.1).

If the subject-matter of a divisional application is restricted to only a part of the subject-matter claimed in the parent application, this part of

the subject-matter must be directly and unambiguously derivable from the parent application as being a separate part or entity, i.e. one which can even be used outside the context of the invention of the parent application (see T 545/92).

In the case of a sequence of applications consisting of a root (originating) application followed by divisional applications, each divided from its predecessor, it is a necessary and sufficient condition for a divisional application of that sequence to comply with Art. 76(1), second sentence, that anything disclosed in that divisional application be directly and unambiguously derivable from what is disclosed in each of the preceding applications as filed (see G 1/06).

1.5 Description and drawings

The description and drawings of the parent application and the or each divisional application should in principle be confined to matter which is relevant to the invention claimed in that application. However, amendment of the description should be required only where it is absolutely necessary. Thus the repetition in a divisional application of matter in the parent application need not be objected to unless it is clearly unrelated to or inconsistent with the invention claimed in the divisional application. As for the matter of cross-references, there is no need for the examiner to check in the description since, under present practice, cross-references are always made between the parent and divisional applications. These appear on the front page of the respective application and patent published after receipt of the divisional application, unless the technical preparations for publication have already been completed.

1.6 Claims

The parent and divisional applications may not claim the same subject-matter (see G-IV, 5.4). This means not only that they must not contain claims of substantially identical scope, but also that one application must not claim the subject-matter claimed in the other, even in different words. The difference between the claimed subject-matter of the two applications must be clearly distinguishable. As a general rule, however, one application may claim its own subject-matter in combination with that of the other application. In other words, if the parent and divisional applications claim separate and distinct elements A and B respectively which function in combination, one of the two applications may also include a claim for A plus B.

2. Applications resulting from a decision under Art. 61

2.1 General remarks

In certain circumstances, before a patent has been granted on a particular application, it may be adjudged as a result of a final decision of a national court that a person other than the applicant is entitled to the grant of a patent thereon. In this event this third party may either:

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| Art. 61(1)(a) | (i) prosecute the application as his own application in place of the applicant; |
| Art. 61(1)(b) | (ii) file a new European patent application in respect of the same invention; or |
| Art. 61(1)(c) | (iii) request that the application be refused. |

(See also G-V, 3).

If the third party adopts the first of these options, he becomes the applicant in place of the former applicant and the prosecution of the application is continued from the position at which it was interrupted.

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| Art. 61(1) and (2)
Rule 17(1) | If, however, the third party files a new application under Art. 61(1)(b), the provisions of Art. 76(1) apply to this new application <i>mutatis mutandis</i> . This means that the new application is treated as though it were a divisional application i.e. it takes the date of filing and the benefit of any priority right of the original application. The examiner must therefore ensure that the subject-matter content of the new application does not extend beyond the content of the original application as filed. The original application is deemed to be withdrawn on the date of filing of the new application for the designated States concerned. |
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2.2 Original application no longer pending

In cases where the original application has been withdrawn, refused or deemed to be withdrawn and is thus no longer pending, Art. 61(1)(b) is applicable, thus allowing the third party to still file a new European patent application in respect of the same invention (see G 3/92).

2.3 Partial entitlement

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| Rule 18(1) | If, by a final decision, it is adjudged that a third party is entitled to the grant of a European patent in respect of only part of the matter disclosed in the European patent application, then the foregoing considerations apply only to that part. In such a case, option (i) mentioned in C-IX, 2.1 is not open to the third party and, regarding option C-IX, 2.1(ii), the new application must be confined to that part of the original subject-matter to which he has become entitled. Similarly, the original application must, for the designated States concerned, be confined to the subject-matter to which the original applicant remains entitled. The new application and the amended original application will stand in a relationship to each other similar to that pertaining between |
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two divisional applications, and they will each stand in a relationship to the original application similar to that in which divisional applications stand in relation to the application from which they are divided. The guidance set out in C-IX, 1.4, 1.5 and 1.6 is therefore applicable to this situation.

2.4 Entitlement for certain designated States only

Where the final decision on entitlement applies only to some of the designated States, the original application may contain different claims, description and drawings for those States compared with the others (see H-III, 4.1, last paragraph, and 4.3).

Rule 18(2)

If the sole result of the application of Art. 61(1) is to divide the right to the grant between the original applicant and the third party so that each may apply for the entire subject-matter for different designated States, each application should be examined in the normal way without regard to the other, with the proviso that the subject-matter of each application must not extend beyond that of the original application.

3. Applications where a reservation has been entered in accordance with Art. 167(2)(a) EPC 1973

See H-III, 4.4.

4 International applications (Euro-PCT applications)

For more details on this topic, see E-VIII.