



# Prior Learning Assessment and Internationally Trained Medical Laboratory Technologists:

---

## Capstone Report

Prepared by: Barbara Haley and Susan Simosko  
Susan Simosko Associates Inc.  
For the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA)  
September 2006

This project is funded in part by the Government of  
Canada's Foreign Credential Recognition Program

Canada

# Prior Learning Assessment and Internationally Trained Medical Laboratory Technologists: Capstone Report

## Introduction

The Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science (CSMLS) is the national certification body for medical laboratory technologists (MLTs). The CSMLS develops and administers entry-level certification examinations for medical laboratory technology in three disciplines: General Medical Laboratory Technology, Clinical Genetics, and Diagnostic Cytology. The CSMLS is also a voluntary, not-for-profit society that represents 14,000 medical laboratory professionals in Canada and around the world.

Previous research has estimated that up to 50% of the medical laboratory technologists in Canada will be eligible to retire in the next 10 years.<sup>1</sup> In an effort to partially address this impending shortage of MLTs, the CSMLS developed a Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) process to evaluate the credentials, education and experience of internationally trained MLTs against the Competency Profile<sup>2</sup> and the education requirements expected of an entry-level technologist in Canada. The goal of the PLA process is to allow internationally trained MLTs to be more quickly deemed eligible to take and pass the certification exam, and thus enter the Canadian labour market.

This project was funded in part by the Government of Canada's Foreign Credential Recognition Program. The CSMLS contracted the Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) to conduct the review, and independent consultants were further contracted to review the PLA process for internationally trained MLTs to:

- Ensure that any unnecessary language, documentation, policy or process barriers were identified
- Create a tool to assist with the assessment of PLA files as the volume of applications increases and more assessors are required

## Methodology

The original project methodology outlined four phases:

Phase 1: Information Gathering

Phase 2: Analysis

Phase 3: Developing and Piloting Innovations including Assessor Training

Phase 4: Validation and Implementation

As part of Phase 1, information from similar certification bodies in Canada and overseas was collected for comparison purposes, and to look for examples of good practice. Information was also gathered by means of extended, in-depth interviews from a variety of stakeholder groups including regulatory bodies and professional associations<sup>3</sup>, bridging and training programs, employers, immigrant and settlement associations as well as CSMLS staff. In addition to these interviews, two half-day focus groups with internationally trained MLTs were conducted. One focus group took place in Hamilton, Ontario and a second in Vancouver, BC.

---

<sup>1</sup> Medical Laboratory Technologists National Human Resources Review—A Call for Action (CSMLS 2002); CSMLS *New Graduate Employment Survey—2003*, Canadian Journal of Medical Laboratory Science 66: 2004

<sup>2</sup> The Competency Profile describes the knowledge, skills, attitudes and judgments necessary for an entry-level medical laboratory technologist to perform successfully in the laboratory.

<sup>3</sup> Not all provinces have regulatory colleges for MLTs.

During Phase 2, the information gathered was analyzed, synthesized and summarized in a report *“Prior Learning Assessment and Internationally Trained Medical Laboratory Technologists: An Investigative Report for the Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science (CSMLS)”*. As part of this investigative report, a number of recommendations were made for improving the PLA process and materials.

In February 2006, this Investigative Report and its recommendations were reviewed in detail at a meeting of the Council on National Certification (CNC). The CNC is an arm’s length body that oversees the certification process and includes representatives from the provincial regulatory colleges and/or provincial professional societies and representatives from the Board of Directors and the Examination Panels. As a result of this detailed review, the recommendations were prioritized and an implementation plan developed for different phases ranging from easily implemented items with a minimal or low cost, to long-term high-cost items.

As a result of this meeting of the CNC, it was determined that there were few recommendations that specifically suggested changes to policy. Thus Phase 3 of the project (Developing and Piloting Innovations including Assessor Training) and Phase 4 (Validation and Implementation) were modified to solely focus on the development of an Assessor Guidebook and associated materials, the development and facilitation of an Assessor training session and the production of this Capstone Report.

### **Development and Validation of Assessor Guidebook and Training Session**

Interviews were conducted, both in-person and by phone, with CSMLS staff including the current assessors and a draft Assessor Guide for the PLA Assessment process was created. In Part 1 of the Guide, the steps for reviewing and assessing a PLA file were presented in a logical sequence including a short narrative description for each. Also included were an explanation of the required activities, details to be verified, and decisions to be made. A draft PLA Summary Worksheet for recording information was also developed.

A validation and training session for assessors took place in April 2006. At this session, three assessors and one staff member validated the material developed and were trained using a number of representative PLA files in conjunction with the draft Guide and Worksheets. Further information was gathered from the training session participants and subsequently used to modify and enhance the Guide and Worksheet<sup>4</sup> including adding a section on the ‘Principles of Assessment’ and the components for Diagnostic Cytology and Clinical Genetics. Short sections on ‘Potentially Fraudulent Situations’ and ‘Country-Specific Information’ were created as examples, with the idea that these would be continually added to and further developed over time by the CSMLS.

### **Further Plans and Changes**

Each of the recommendations from the Investigative Report was analyzed and prioritized by the CNC. As the CSMLS is working with limited resources, both human and monetary, all changes were evaluated to decide which items could be accomplished easily and within the limited existing budget and which would require external funding and/or assistance. Progress to date and plans for the future are detailed for each recommendation below.

### **Quick Fix**

A number of recommendations were evaluated as being fairly easy to accomplish, at little or no cost. These items were slated for immediate implementation and most have already been started and some completed. These “quick fix” items are as follows:

---

<sup>4</sup> See the associated PLA Assessor Guide and PLA Summary Worksheet.

- **Learning Plans:** CSMLS is in the process of revising the use of learning plans. They are developing a pre-approved list of courses and will provide a consultative service to those who want it on a fee-per-service basis. They plan to stay in-touch with course providers who are on the pre-approved list, and request that the CSMLS be notified of any changes to course content. It is anticipated that the revisions should be completed by late Fall 2006, and the CSMLS plans to update their flyer on the process. These changes will allow the CSMLS to provide faster service to applicants as well as a clearer and easier system for this stage of the process. The current process of customizing learning plans for individual applicants is very time-consuming for the CSMLS so they also will reap the benefits of being able to spend less time on this process.
- **ICES:** CSMLS has already started discussions with ICES on the possibility of sharing information, and has requested that ICES customize its language to improve its communication with applicants. The time and often considerable costs involved in requesting documents from foreign schools for both ICES and CSMLS was mentioned by all stakeholder groups, and these changes could provide important time and money savings to applicants.
- **Templates:** CSMLS is planning to use existing examples on file to design letter templates that conform to acceptable standards for applicants to give to education institutions and/or employers when requesting information and documents. It is anticipated that this work may be contracted out and will be completed by late Fall 2006. It is anticipated that the applicants will see immediate benefits since this change will make the process of applying for documents easier for them, clearer for their former employers or educational institutions as well as providing a possible costs savings as the requests would not have to be repeated due to lack of sufficient/correct information. This change will also likely provide a time and cost savings to CSMLS as they may have fewer inquiries to answer about this process and they may receive fewer insufficient/incorrect documents about which they then have to contact the applicant to request further information.
- **Name Changes:** CSMLS has already enhanced its information for applicants whose name has been changed due to marriage etc. They have provided a detailed explanation of who and when applicants are required to provide a notarized proof of name change.

A further item was identified as a “quick fix”, but would involve some investment.

- **Exam Handbook and Competency Based Testing Information:** CSMLS plans to move the Blueprint to the front of the exam handbook and may change its name to “Exam Weighting”, as well as developing information for applicants on competency based testing. While they have decided not to create a practice test, they plan to provide increased numbers of examples and would explain how competency exams are different from other types of exams. They also plan to provide more information on multiple choice questions and strategies for writing exams. It is anticipated that this will be completed in the fall if sufficient resources are available. CSMLS would also like to consider the possibility of employing different means of relaying this exam information such as developing a video or course that would be useful to both internationally and Canadian educated applicants. Both applicants and the CSMLS would benefit from these changes. Applicants would find the process clearer, more transparent and user-friendly and have a greater chance of success while the CSMLS would benefit from the goodwill generated and a reduction in the number of costly inquiries from applicants.

***Moderate to high investment of time and money required***

- **Communication:** A number of the recommendations relating to communication were grouped together and evaluated as useful for a variety of stakeholders but which would require a moderate to high investment of both time and money. Because of the extensive scope of this project external funding will be required. CSMLS anticipates that the earliest

this communications issue could be addressed would be 2007. The recommendations detailed a number of suggested changes to the CSMLS Website and to print and on-line documents, and the CSMLS sees these changes taking place in a multi-pronged project that would address both the content of the information being communicated as well as the need for "plain language". CSMLS plans to refine their key documents to more fully explain the purpose of each item as well as creating a flow chart or process map and FAQ list. They also plan to make the website more welcoming and user-friendly and will look at revising the Letter of Assessment to incorporate the suggested changes found in the recommendations. These changes would primarily benefit the applicants who would find the print and web materials easier to interpret and more inviting. However, other users of this information such as bridging and training programs would also benefit from these changes as would CSMLS staff who would likely find that the increased clarity of the materials reduces the number of requests for information and clarification.

### ***High investment of time and money required***

- **Language proficiency:** The recommendations relating to this issue were evaluated as requiring a significant investment of time and money in order to research English language proficiency options other than TOEFL, including looking at the need to equate scores from different systems (should several systems be implemented). The CSMLS hopes to be able to develop a proposal to garner the necessary funding for this project within the next six months. Applicants would be the immediate beneficiaries of several English language test options.
- **Create video/CD of process:** CSMLS is looking into the option of working with the Canadian Foundation for Economic Education (CFEE) to create vignettes of MLTs who have come to Canada. The increased publicity for MLTs would also raise the profile of the profession.

### ***Recommendations not currently being pursued***

- **Personal Competency Rating Booklet:** While the recommendations for using this booklet solely as a means for people to self-select in or out of the process generated a great deal of discussion, it was decided that the booklet will remain included in the CSMLS assessment of a PLA file. The competencies have been rated for criticality, as part of the assessor training process. The content and language of the booklet will be addressed as part of the above-noted multi-pronged communication project. There are no plans to create other self-assessment tools, such as the one used by IMG Ontario and also the rating system will not be revised other than as noted above.
- **Practice Test:** There are no current plans to create a practice test.
- **Competency Profile:** The recommendation that the information (e.g. the code of professional conduct) contained in this booklet should be referenced in other documents was noted, and will be kept in mind for possible future revisions.
- **Assessment—OSCE:** The recommendation to create and offer an OSCE examination is not being pursued due to time and cost considerations as well as the decision that an OSCE is more appropriate to health care workers whose work involves direct touching and a high degree of interactivity with patients. ,
- **Assessment—Pilot:** CSMLS feels that it is fairly rare to find situations in which they receive applications for different candidates who are from the same country, same school, in the same year and thus the benefits to piloting a project to allow these applicants to provide fewer educational documents would not be sufficient to offset the costs involved.
- **Assessment—mini-screening exam:** The possibility of creating an on-line mini-screening exam based on the critical Competencies was recommended and this is not being pursued; however, there has been some discussion on the idea of developing a short on-line knowledge-based screening tool. It was suggested that questions on

- knowledge could be developed for each of the major areas (e.g. Microbiology, Clinical Chemistry etc.) but there are no immediate plans to take this project forward.
- **Options for Certification:** Subject certification is an issue that is discussed regularly, and at the present time, CSMLS and CNC have a position statement to the effect that this is not an option.
  - **On-line tracking system for PLA files:** It was decided that this is not a feasible option at the present time, considering current PLA volumes.
  - **Information portals:** The recommendation to ensure that CSMLS is represented on the “Going to Canada” portal will be brought forward for future action, but is not currently feasible. The site is still being developed and does not yet reflect the information for Physicians. As well, developing other links to external websites is seen as a project that should wait until after the CSMLS website revisions have been implemented.
  - **Embassies and consulates:** CSMLS is currently not able to provide information directly to embassies and consulates. It is unlikely given their limited resources that this will change in the near future.
  - **Information Leaflet for employers and immigrant settlement associations:** This recommendation is not being pursued as it is felt that leaflets or flyers quickly become outdated, and that it would be more useful to pursue marketing information opportunities that are more easily updated, such as through the internet.

### ***Ongoing***

The CSMLS plans to continue to advocate, as opportunities arise, for maintaining and increasing government funding for bridging programs.



Capstone Report: An Investigative Report for  
the Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science (CSMLS)

This project is funded in part by the Government of  
Canada's Foreign Credential Recognition Program



*“The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author  
and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.”*



# Prior Learning Assessment and Internationally Trained Medical Laboratory Technologists:

---

## Executive Summary

Prepared by: Barbara Haley and Susan Simosko  
Susan Simosko Associates Inc.  
For the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA)  
May 2006

This project is funded in part by the Government of  
Canada's Foreign Credential Recognition Program

Canada 



# Executive Summary

## Introduction

It is estimated that up to 50% of medical laboratory technologists (MLTs) in Canada will be eligible to retire in the next 10 years. Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) has been considered a partial solution to this impending shortage of trained professionals. It is hoped that a PLA process will allow internationally trained MLTs to be more quickly deemed eligible to take and pass the certification exam and enter the Canadian labour market. However, the huge increase of interest in PLA as an option has created workload and financial issues for the Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Society (CSMLS). The CSMLS is the national certifying body for medical laboratory technologists.

This report provides an interim analysis of a study that examines the Prior Learning Assessment processes, policies and procedures developed by the CSMLS for internationally trained medical laboratory technologists. Through its PLA process, the CSMLS evaluates the academic credentials, language proficiency, medical laboratory training and work experience of internationally trained MLTs to determine whether a person is eligible to write the national certification exam.

This study, funded in part by the Government of Canada, through Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) and supported by the Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA), is part of a wider project designed to assist the CSMLS as it continues to identify and reduce potential barriers for internationally trained MLTs and maximize the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of the PLA process.

## Methodology

There are four project phases<sup>5</sup>:

Phase 1: Information Gathering

Phase 2: Analysis

Phase 3: Developing and Piloting Innovations including Assessor Training

Phase 4: Validation and Implementation

Phases 1 and 2 are now complete. The information gathered and analyzed thus far provides the foundation for this interim report. During Phase 1, information was gathered from a number of stakeholder groups: CSMLS staff, regulatory and examining bodies,<sup>6</sup> bridging and training programs, employers, and immigrant settlement services. In each case, extended, in-depth interviews<sup>7</sup> were conducted, most often by telephone. In addition to these interviews, two half-day focus groups<sup>8</sup> with internationally trained MLTs, representing nine nations, were held. Also, a number of websites<sup>9</sup> for other occupational bodies were evaluated and many articles and documents reviewed. During Phase 2, all information was analysed and the interim report prepared.

---

<sup>5</sup> As a result of the Information Gathering and Analysis phases (Phases 1 and 2) of this study, a number of recommendations to improve the PLA process and materials were presented in this report. However, since few of the recommended changes applied to policy, the CSMLS asked the consultants to amend the project methodology. The methodology was therefore changed to eliminate Phase 4 and required the consultants to focus solely on the assessment process during Phase 3. During this Phase the consultants developed and drafted an Assessor Guide and Assessor Worksheet and facilitated a two-day training event for assessors.

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this report, we have referred to people who oversee MLTs as regulators; however, not all provinces have regulators and Colleges.

<sup>7</sup> Appendix 1 provides an illustration of the types of questions asked during the telephone interviews with employers and regulators.

<sup>8</sup> Appendix 2 provides the agenda and questions used during these sessions.

<sup>9</sup> Detailed information from these sites are provided in Appendix 3.

## **Findings**

The research indicates that the majority of prospective MLT immigrants do not have access to information that would help them to make informed decisions about how to become certified MLTs once in Canada. Immigrants report that as they receive “points” from immigration officials for being trained as MLTs, they arrive in Canada with high expectations for employment. A number of study participants explained that it is only after immigrants are in Canada that they realize how much easier it would have been to start the PLA process, gathering documents and having information sent to the CSMLS, from their countries of origin<sup>10</sup>. Additionally, many immigrants expressed confusion about the necessary steps required for certification even after arriving and living in Canada.

### ***CSMLS materials***

A number of issues were raised about the materials used in the PLA process. Many stakeholders commented that the CSMLS website did not present information in a step-by-step fashion and that, despite improvements, the “process is still not ‘intuitive’ enough for people from overseas.” Additionally, the language, layout and information contained in the Information Handbook is often confusing and not welcoming, and stakeholders suggested that the clarity and user-friendliness of the document could be improved. Focus group participants and others also wanted more explanation about the requirements and necessary documents, including why these things are required and what criteria were used to judge them.

Comments were also gathered about the Personal Competency Rating Booklet. Most focus group participants were not clear about the purpose of this booklet and thus did not feel able to rate themselves honestly, as they were not sure “how far this would be taken, and how much weight would be given to (their) answers”. The majority of people who spoke about the Personal Competency Rating Booklet also reported that the instructions and requirements for completing it were not clear. They were unclear as to the level of detail that was required, and found that the example provided did not cover the many types of situations possible or help them to understand how to use the rating scale.

The Competency Profile, also called the “Competencies Expected of an Entry-Level Medical Laboratory Technologist”, contains essential information for MLTs; however, most focus group participants were not aware of the information contained in this Booklet, including the exam blueprint or weighting, although “failure to use the CSMLS competency profile/blueprint negatively impacts on examination results.”<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, people found the Examination Handbook overwhelming and somewhat confusing. They noted in particular that only a few sample questions were provided and questioned why more items could not be included.

### ***Language***

Language fluency was highlighted as a key issue for internationally trained MLTs. Candidates who did not complete their training in English<sup>12</sup> are required to take either the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Test of Spoken English (TSE) (computer or paper-based) or the newly introduced TOEFL iBT (internet based testing). While some focus group participants recognized that these tests are “necessary”, others complained about the cost and the problems of gaining access to the tests, especially the speaking module. Employers, however, cited language as one of the primary obstacles to hiring someone trained abroad and suggested that English language training needs to focus more on the “shorthand and terminology” used in the workplace. Bridging program representatives raised concerns

---

<sup>10</sup> As of 2001, applicants can apply for assessment from outside of Canada.

<sup>11</sup> *Determination of Factors Contributing to Examination Success for Prior Learning Assessment Candidates*, Christine Nielsen, CSMLS, HSM Practicum Ryerson University, April 2004. p. 7

<sup>12</sup> The CSMLS uses CanTEST for French language testing.

about the tests themselves including the issue of cultural bias, the effects of fear of failure, and lack of familiarity with the testing situation<sup>13</sup>.

### ***Gathering and assessing documents***

Internationally trained MLTs report that obtaining educational and workplace documents from their former countries is often a major obstacle. Most applicants expressed concerns about the long delays and very considerable expense associated with obtaining and translating documents. Similarly, the majority of focus group participants reported great difficulty in obtaining employer letters, especially the detailed letters required by the CSMLS, often because their former employers had moved, retired or could not be contacted for other reasons. CSMLS staff commented that about 50% of the employer letters do not include the required level of detail.

Similar issues emerged when focus group participants spoke of their experiences in trying to obtain transcripts and course outlines for their medical laboratory programs. In addition to issues of cost and time, most participants reported that they had difficulty convincing their institutions to fulfill their requests, because the school had closed; officials at the institution would only communicate with other institutions, not an individual; and/or because people who assisted with this request could be subject to punishment.

CSMLS staff noted that applicants do not fully understand the importance and weight given to course outlines in the assessment process.

Bridging programs, regulators and focus group participants all commented that the International Credential Evaluation Service (ICES) process “takes too long” and “creates undue stress and frustration” for applicants, especially with the need to provide original sets of education documents to both ICES and the CSMLS.

Once all documents are received by the CSMLS, the applicant’s PLA file is turned over to an assessor who reviews all of the information to see if some combination of the applicant’s education and experience are equivalent to what is required by current Canadian programs in medical laboratory science. A PLA Letter outlining the result of this review (along with other information) is sent to the candidate. While MLT candidates reported that the letter is complicated, long and difficult to understand and also rather harsh-sounding, both regulators and bridging program representatives said they found the letter very useful. One regulator said, “The letter is much better now and the information at the end (a summary of the person’s education and experience) is really helpful.” Data from 2004, as reported by the CSMLS, showed that only 13% to 15% of the PLA files are assessed as being equivalent the first time, and about 80% of the candidates are advised, after their initial assessment, that they will need to take further course work before they can be deemed equivalent.

### ***Learning Plans***

The learning plan process requires candidates to select courses or clinical practice that will address the learning needs identified in their Letters of Assessment, and submit information (e.g. full course descriptions) to the CSMLS for review. Participants in the focus groups did not have much to say about the Learning Plans. Those who had developed/received one reported that they are “fine.” However, on further probing, it was clear that most candidates could not identify the primary purpose of a Learning Plan and none remembered reading about them on the CSMLS website.

---

<sup>13</sup> The Michener Institute reported they are developing a profession-specific language assessment. BCIT has developed an English language assessment specific to the Med Lab field. Appendix 4 provides an example of the type of questions in the BCIT assessment.

### ***Acquiring additional knowledge and skills***

When an applicant's PLA assessment reveals small gaps in their education or work history, course work is recommended (via the Letter of Assessment). Focus group participants disagreed on the effectiveness of course work; however, the majority of stakeholders felt the courses were not effective because they provided theory rather than practical experience and were of limited use when studying for a competency-based exam.

PLA applicants with small gaps may also be referred to bridging programs, if there is a one available in their geographic region. Regulators, CSMLS staff, and most employers indicated that the beneficial role played by bridging programs could not be overstated. For focus group participants, bridging programs were "one of the most useful tools for getting foreign trained technologists into the workforce quickly." One major concern raised by participants and others is that there are not enough bridging program placements for all the internationally trained MLTs who require one. Another issue, raised by focus group participants, regulators and employers, focused on costs—both financial and personal. A few employers also raised the concern that the quality of work shown by graduates of bridging programs is not equal to that of graduates from a full-time diploma program.

Remediation through course work or bridging programs will not be useful for PLA candidates with comprehensive gaps in education, training and/or work experience. These candidates are referred to regional training programs.

There was unanimous agreement that the clinical practice provided by the bridging programs is an absolutely critical component for internationally trained MLTs. One regulator stressed this by saying, "Clinical placements are a make-or-break issue for most internationally trained MLTs." However, at this time, at least half of the employers interviewed are not offering any clinical placements to internationally trained students, as part of a bridging program. Of the remaining half, many report taking far fewer students than in the past. Employers said that the two primary reasons for this is their own lack of adequate financial resources and the communication limitations of internationally trained MLTs.

### ***Certification examination***

Staff, regulators and focus group participants all commented that there are no practice tests available for the CSMLS exam although it has been found that "use of examination preparation material significantly improves pass rates on the examination..."<sup>14</sup> While staff acknowledges that this is an issue, they were concerned that the cost of producing each test item (\$300 to \$500) made it very difficult for them to release questions simply for practice.

Only 34% of PLA candidates pass the certification exam on their first attempt. This compares poorly with the rate of 86% for candidates from accredited training programs.<sup>15</sup> When the focus group participants were asked whether they had ever written multiple-choice exams before, they all said that they had. However, many of them then added that these types of tests are quite different in their countries of origin. One person summed up the experience by saying, "Multiple-choice tests are different here. All the answers look the same, and they don't tell you to choose the most probable one. Finding a correct answer often depends on excluding less-likely options." Bridging programs representatives and regulators also thought that language might be a significant barrier affecting the performance of internationally trained MLTs.

---

<sup>14</sup> *Determination of Factors Contributing to Examination Success for Prior Learning Assessment Candidates*, Christine Nielsen, CSMLS, HSM Practicum Ryerson University, April 2004. p. 8

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 11

CSMLS staff commented that the security of the exam is an issue of paramount importance. Although they acknowledged the importance of ensuring test security, bridging and training program representatives and employers thought that more information on the exam needs to be made available. Additionally, many participants in the study reported that candidates often do not understand the feedback they receive on the exam and, in particular, do not know how to use it to help them prepare for rewriting the examination.

### **Employment**

When asked what skills, knowledge and abilities they were looking for, most employers focused on the importance of the “softer skills”, especially the need for good communication skills. Good technical skills were also ranked highly, but often in combination with communication skills. Several said that while they felt they could provide some training to augment immigrants’ technical skills, they did not have the time to train for communication skills.

Employers reported that they use only a few options for recruitment including promoting and hiring from within the company, posting externally on the organization’s website or on Workopolis.com, or via word of mouth.

A few employers specifically stated that internationally trained MLTs bring special skills and abilities to the workplace; however, at least half the employers did not find that this was the case. The employers who *did* note the special strengths of internationally trained MLTs provided a fairly extensive list of these characteristics. These employers commented that people coming into the Canadian workforce have already overcome numerous barriers to reach this point. In doing so, said one employer, they have demonstrated perseverance and a desire to make a contribution to the profession.

Several employers highlighted a number of concerns about internationally trained MLTs (or bridging program students). Language and communication skills were mentioned most frequently. One employer summed up the views of others by saying, “Looking at the big picture, internationally educated MLTs require more and better language abilities, but they often don’t think they do.” Technical skills and the fast pace of many labs were also cited by employers as concerns. One employer suggested that many internationally trained MLTs lack exposure to some of the equipment found in Canadian laboratories, and are not used to the high volume of work required in a Canadian lab. Cultural differences were also cited as an area of concern by employers.

Regulators, bridging program representatives and focus group participants all reported that, in general, there are relatively few job postings right now, especially for full-time positions. Employers, however, were almost evenly divided on the question of whether or not there is a current shortage of MLTs. One employer described the situation by saying, “There are actually two kinds of skill shortages happening. One is just a general lack of people applying for jobs. The second, however, is that we are losing experienced and knowledgeable (people).” On the other hand, one employer felt there was “a bit of a disconnect” between the shortages as reported in the media and the large number of applicants for each position.

### **Other issues**

People from all stakeholder groups made very positive comments about changes<sup>16</sup> the CSMLS has introduced over the past few years. The availability of the Handbook on the website, the more detailed assessment reports, and the rigour of the screening process were each noted.

A number of stakeholders reported that they were very pleased with the positive changes introduced by the CSMLS to improve communication. In particular they noted changes in efficiency and the speed with which calls were returned. On the other hand, stakeholders felt there were still issues to be resolved

---

<sup>16</sup> For a summary of some of the improvements already made see: *E-Health and the International Mobility of Skilled Health Professionals*, UBC and the Faculty of Medicine at University of Calgary, Kendall Ho et al. p.54.

regarding the level of contact between the CSMLS and applicants and assumptions made in the documents and on the website. CSMLS staff highlighted a number of issues around the topic of communication including the high volume of PLA emails received and responded to. CSMLS reported receiving between 178 and 347 PLA emails and sending between 231 to 434 PLA emails monthly during 2005.<sup>17</sup>

The CSMLS reported that the cost to provide PLA as an option is probably not recovered from the fees charged to the applicants and question the long-term sustainability of this process. The Society staff admitted that, in general, the volume of PLA assessments is much greater than they had anticipated but since their membership is voluntary, they do not have a way of creating a larger financial base to subsidize the process.

The issue of subject certification was originally raised by employers. Its benefit to the Canadian workplace was examined by a special task force in the late 80's, as there were numerous concerns about the limited scope within which the subject certified technologist could work, as well as the very poor success rates of subject exam applicants. Discontinuance of individual subject certification in the general disciplines along with the very small specialty subjects was recommended in 1988 and implemented in 1996. Subject certification in cytotechnology and clinical genetics is still offered by the Society. However, all employers from both public and private labs, except for one, were in favour of bringing back subject certification. One employer stated, "It is strangling us not to have subject certification in Ontario...the biggest human resource mistake was getting rid of this subject certification and it has to come back." A second summed up the situation by saying, "The CSMLS should reconsider the idea of subject certification. It does not make sense for an internationally educated person to have to pass a general exam if they will only ever work in one area." These comments were echoed by bridging program representatives and focus group participants.

### **Website review**

A detailed website review of ten Canadian occupational bodies and three credentialing bodies from other countries was conducted as part of the study. The review examined the layout, information provided, and examples of good practice and compared these to the CSMLS website, process and materials for internationally trained candidates. At a general level, most of the occupational/credentialing bodies examined have fairly similar processes in place for international applicants. Within these general processes, however, a myriad of detailed differences between occupational bodies makes direct comparison with the CSMLS process difficult. Items of note from each occupational/credentialing body are cited in the report, and a detailed comparison of requirements is provided in Appendix 3.

### **Recommendations**

A number of recommendations were generated as a result of the findings of this study. These are **summarized** below under a number of general categories. At the outset, it is important to note that the CSMLS is not alone in addressing the issue of how to assess and support internationally trained professionals to enter the workforce. The increase in the number of PLA requests and the updating of internal systems has stretched the Society's available resources. Without the current PLA system, even with its existing limitations, internationally trained MLTs would face even greater hurdles.

#### **External sources of information**

- The CSMLS, in collaboration with the Government of Canada, should provide Canadian embassies, consulates, and government websites with clear, detailed and current information on the MLT certification process and work opportunities in Canada. This will enable potential immigrants to obtain the information they need to develop practical plans to meet certification requirements and a more realistic understanding of employment opportunities **prior** to coming to Canada.

---

<sup>17</sup> See Appendix 5 for the tracking data from January to August 2005.

### **CSMLS Website**

- The CSMLS should seek to improve the portion of the CSMLS website directed at internationally trained applicants in order to provide a more welcoming, “big picture” view of the process. The website should encourage potential immigrants to start the PLA process while still in their countries of origin, and provide links to all the necessary components of the certification process including a detailed “Frequently Asked Questions” page.

### **Materials:**

- With English-as-a-second language applicants in mind, a number of recommendations suggested reviewing, clarifying and simplifying the language and layout of all CSMLS documents. It was suggested that the CSLMS continue to make materials easier to read and understand, add user-friendly graphics and glossaries, and provide explanations regarding the purpose of each requirement. To help applicants with the difficult process of gathering all the necessary documents and employer letters, it was suggested that the CSMLS design easy-to-use templates<sup>18</sup> and that the Personal Competency Rating Booklet be used solely to help candidates self-select in or out of the PLA process. It was also suggested that Learning Plans be made mandatory, or eliminated entirely. Lastly, a number of suggestions focused on making all documents more welcoming.

### **English language requirements**

- The CSMLS should consider providing additional alternatives to applicants for proving English language fluency and more detailed explanation as to the importance of this issue be highlighted in the CSMLS publications and website.

### **ICES**

- The CSMLS should work with ICES to investigate the possibility of facilitating the exchange of information/documents between ICES and the CSMLS and improving communication systems with applicants.

### **Practice Test**

- The CSMLS should consider creating a practice test using test items no longer in use.

### **Assessment**

- The CSMLS should consider modifying the assessment process, including possibly piloting a system that would allow candidates from the same country and same school, in the same year to provide fewer educational documents, and also possibly creating and offering an OSCE examination.

### **Options for Certification**

- The CSMLS should consider reviewing the need for subject certification options.

### **Other**

- The CSMLS should consider developing an on-line tracking system for PLA files for applicants and a CD/PowerPoint presentation about the PLA process. Lastly, it was suggested that the CSMLS continue to work with the Government of Canada to implement and maintain the long-term sustainability of bridging programs across Canada, focusing on didactic and clinical education, as well as profession-specific language proficiency.

---

<sup>18</sup> See Appendix 6 for a template for a “Sample Letter to Enable Candidates to Request Letters from Past Employers”.



Executive Summary: An Investigative Report for  
the Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science (CSMLS)

This project is funded in part by the Government of  
Canada's Foreign Credential Recognition Program



*“The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author  
and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.”*