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**Investigation of Language Assessment Tools  
and Benchmarks Necessary for Success for  
Internationally Educated Medical Laboratory Technologists**

**Executive Summary  
July 2008**



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project was developed in order to investigate and validate the standards of the Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science (CSMLS) for language proficiency of internationally educated medical laboratory technologists (IEMLTs) who apply to the CSMLS prior learning assessment (PLA) process. The project was funded by the Government of Ontario and took place from January 2007 to June 2008.

The intent of the project was to evaluate the level of language proficiency required to succeed in the medical laboratory workplace and at the various stages of the CSMLS certification process. The ultimate goal was to identify means of expediting IEMLT progress through the PLA process and ultimately into the workplace. The major activities carried out in this project were:

1. Benchmarking the language proficiency demands of the CSMLS certification examination
2. Benchmarking the communicative demands of medical laboratory practice
3. Mapping English language proficiency tests
4. Benchmarking the credentialing continuum for IEMLTs
5. Data gathering on PLA files opened in 2004, 2005, 2006 to track PLA candidate progress
6. Deliberation on and implementation of PLA policy and process changes where suggested by project findings.

The work on the first four activities by the consulting firm engaged for this project resulted in the following outcomes:

- recommended broadening the tests accepted by CSMLS to include IELTS and CanTest;
- validated the current language proficiency standard for the CSMLS examination, which maps to a CLB level 8;
- offered a framework for differentiating types of communication skills and levels of proficiency needed (speaking, reading, writing, listening);
- provided guidelines for the nature and timing of language proficiency testing for IEMLTs;
- revealed the role of high-stakes situations in intensifying the need for communication skills not measured by standard language proficiency testing;
- pointed to the need for greater attention to profession-specific language training for preparation for credentialing examinations and the workplace;
- suggested that academically-oriented language proficiency tests fall short in assessing/predicting profession-specific language skills;
- advocated consideration of profession-specific language proficiency testing;
- supported earlier studies about the value of professional bridging programs and clinical experience as preparation for entry into the workplace; and
- pointed out the need to consider the natural acquisition of language over time, i.e., during bridging programs or refresher training as part of the PLA continuum.

Significant outcomes of this project were the validation of the CSMLS standards for language proficiency for IEMLT success in the certification examination and the benchmarking of language proficiency needs for the workplace and for the various stages of the PLA and certification process. The language proficiency test 'mapping' table makes a contribution to the

language proficiency testing literature. The file audit activities permitted collection of tracking data on PLA candidates and their progress through the PLA process.

The findings of this project suggested that the CSMLS PLA policy could benefit from some changes to enhance its accessibility and fairness. Two policy changes were recommended by the CSMLS Council on National Certification (the governance body that oversees all certification processes and policy) and subsequently approved by the CSMLS Board of Directors:

1. Effective January 1, 2008, the CSMLS initiated a pilot phase for a new policy in which IELTS and CanTest are accepted as proof of language proficiency. This is expected to become permanent policy on January 1, 2009.
2. Effective July 1, 2008, the CSMLS has adopted a 'two-stage' language proficiency process, accepting language proficiency scores mapping to CLB 6 for entry into the PLA process, but maintaining the CLB 8 requirement to proceed to the certification examination.

The CSMLS has communicated the policy changes to all stakeholders and has embarked upon a broad dissemination strategy in various venues, including IEMLTs, stakeholders in the medical laboratory profession, publications, presentations at professional conferences and meetings of organizations with interests in professional credentialing and health human resources.

Conducting this project has offered the CSMLS the following insights and benefits:

- an evidence base and validation for its language proficiency cut scores and PLA processes;
- an opportunity to explore and model responsive, accountable and equitable practices in PLA and professional credentialing;
- a heightened awareness of the issues of IEMLTs, including greater familiarity with the literature and background information on credentialing and language proficiency testing;
- an opportunity to network and share resources among regulators, other health professions, and stakeholders in the credentialing and employment of internationally educated health professionals;
- a confirmation of the importance of appropriate and validated language proficiency requirements utilized by professions and credentialing agencies;
- anecdotal confirmation of the presence of inequitable obstacles for IEMLTs that are *not* related to language proficiency and which merit further investigation, acknowledgement and remedy;
- an appreciation of the challenges of tracking PLA applicants through the process.

This project has permitted the CSMLS to enhance the accountability and accessibility of its prior learning assessment and credentialing processes through evidence-informed policies and practices. In turn, this is expected to expedite the transition of IEMLTs through professional certification and into the workplace. The project has facilitated a valid, fair and evidence-based standard for language proficiency as well as policy and process changes that are advantageous for IEMLTs. In addition, it has provided the foundation for further research and support strategies for internationally educated health professionals.