

Executive Summary

Discipline-Specific Certification: a feasibility study

June 2024, **updated September 26, 2024**

Overview

Most areas of the country are experiencing widespread labour market shortages for laboratory professionals. Data suggests that this trend is likely to worsen in the near term owing to planned retirements across the industry. At the same time, only about 40% of Internationally Educated Medical Laboratory Technologists (IEMLT) who apply for a CSMLS Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), in one of three Medical Laboratory Technologist/Technology (MLT) designations, General MLT, Clinical Genetics MLT, and Diagnostic Cytology MLT, ultimately become CSMLS certified (MLT). To this end, the CSMLS is looking to assess the appetite among PLA clients/applicants, Canadian employers, and provincial regulators for CSMLS to develop discipline-specific national certification programs and exams for the General MLT designation only.

Working with a Task Force comprised of employers, regulators, certified IEMLTs, and CSMLS staff, a series of high-level research questions were established:

- Is there sufficient demand among IEMLTs and potential employers to justify creating a discipline-specific certification program?
- Which disciplines are most in demand? Are all worth pursuing?
- Are there any significant regulatory impediments or repercussions that would result from establishing a discipline-specific certification program?

Methodology

Primary research (surveys and focus groups) with employers and IEMLTs was conducted to address these questions. Representation from across the country and in a variety of population centers (i.e. rural and urban) was realized. Findings and themes associated with each are bulleted below:

IEMLTs (300 responses)

- 80% of respondents would have considered discipline-specific certification if it led to faster licensure and employment outcomes.
- Over half of respondents (55%) indicated that being certified as a single-discipline MLT would be as fulfilling as being certified as a full-discipline MLT.

- 92% of IEMLTs indicated interest in shift work if it meant quicker entry into the workforce.

Employers (230 responses)

- Nearly two-thirds of respondents indicated being “very eager” to hire individuals with discipline-specific certification (assuming there were no regulatory impediments).
- Employers noted the central role of unions when it comes to compensation. It was generally felt that discipline-specific workers would receive a similar rate of pay to their full-discipline MLT counterparts.
- Employers indicated strong demand for the multi-discipline “core lab” (i.e. Hematology, Clinical Chemistry, and Transfusion Science); with that said, the survey data shows “high demand” for all disciplines.
- Employers noted that rural areas often require multi-discipline laboratory staff (i.e., full MLT scope) due to the nature of their operations – hence, discipline-specific work may be more suited to larger labs in higher-density population centers.

Professional Regulation

The ability of regulators to recognize and license individuals based on a discipline-specific model is central to the feasibility of this program, if regulated and/or certified professionals are required for working in a diagnostic medical laboratory. A parallel project sponsored by the Canadian Alliance of Medical Laboratory Professionals Regulators (CAMLPR) is also investigating this possibly. Per the most recent update (April 2023), this initiative aims to:

develop an online portal for internationally educated MLTs and Canadian-educated applicants whose education does not qualify them through the current process; [develop] entry-to-practice competencies to ensure they reflect current laboratory workplace requirements; and [streamline] the registration process for individuals whose background and preparation equip them to work as MLTs in their field(s) of practice as jurisdictional legislation allows.

For the purpose of this research and accompanying recommendations, the assumption has been made that, at present, most provincial regulations (in those provinces that license MLTs) would not currently permit discipline-specific practice.

Owing to the lack of MLT provincial regulation in BC, there is greater flexibility in the ability of an employer to hire an individual with certification in one or two disciplines and provide them with ongoing training as needed. This approach may be more challenging in regulated jurisdictions where licenses would likely be required for each discipline, whose legislation requires/dictates full-discipline licensure, or who will not allow IEMLTs with more than one (General MLT designation only) significant gap to be assigned a learning plan to remediate those gaps. Canadian provincial MLT regulator policy for PLA clients with more than one significant gap in the General MLT designation requires these clients to attend a full Canadian EQAL accredited MLT/MLS educational program. This greatly reduces the amount of IEMLTs entering the Canadian workforce as an MLT.

Potential Volume of Applicants

An analysis of CSMLS PLA data was undertaken to estimate what the annual demand might be for CSMLS discipline-specific certification. Between May 2019 and May 2024, 815 individuals applied through the CSMLS PLA process to have their credentials assessed. In short, it appears that the likely demand would be most promising for Hematology (60% assessed as equivalent to this General discipline) and least promising for Histotechnology (18% assessed as equivalent to this General discipline). Approximately half of all PLA clients/applicants would also benefit from a discipline-specific certification program in the other three disciplines (Chemistry, Transfusion Science, and Microbiology). Total demand is likely to come from those with proficiency in one to four (1-4) disciplines, that is, approximately 100 individuals annually, but the actual demand for a discipline-specific certification program may vary.

A proportion of the 100 individuals cited above, whose education and laboratory experience has been partially recognized with an assigned learning plan, may elect to remediate identified gaps and pursue the full MLT designation (especially those with just one gap). Conversely, those IEMLTs with two to four (2-4) significant gaps, and who may not normally apply for PLA as their educational and laboratory experience would not be recognized and they would be required to attend a full Canadian Equal accredited MLT/MLS educational program, may choose to apply for the PLA or continue with discipline-specific certification, if Exam eligibility was expanded to those IEMLTs who are found to be equivalent in even a single discipline.

Recommendations or Future Action

The Task Force met on May 29, 2024, to discuss the implications of this research and develop a set of recommendations for consideration by the CSMLS Board of Directors. Several parameters were considered, specifically: IEMLT interest, employer demand (by discipline), and regulatory considerations.

It is felt that there is a real and immediate need for discipline-specific certification to address both the acute labour market shortages and the desire for IEMLTs to be able to work in their field more expeditiously than they are now. It is also felt that this approach is not only essential to address current shortages but to stabilize conditions over the long-term ensuring timely access to diagnostic laboratory testing for all Canadians.

Based on the research conducted, the following recommendations were proffered by the Task Force.

- Develop discipline specific exams for at least Hematology, Clinical Chemistry, and Transfusion Science.
- Pilot these exams (initially in English only) through partnerships with employers in British Columbia.
- Offer these exams each at least twice a year.
- Apply the same exam/rewrite policies as per the General MLT exam eligibility policies.

- Seek third-party funding to offset the initial costs associated with item development and exam form creation.

CSMLS Board of Directors Decision – June 20, 2024

Following review of the complete Task Force Report and costing information, the CSMLS Board of Directors (BOD) will make a final decision in September 2024. They are seeking additional information including potential discipline-specific examination policy, timeline of pilot from implementation to completion, resource needs (staff, subject matter expertise, etc.), and a better understanding of the demand in British Columbia (BC). Additional BC employer input will be sought during the summer to best inform the BOD.

Author: Keith Johnson, KJ Consulting

CSMLS Board of Directors Direction – July 24, 2024

In September 2024, the Board will review cost information for one discipline exam pilot in 2025. Pursuit of external funding is suspended. As well, the employer outreach is suspended. (Revision July 25, 2024, C. Nielsen)

CSMLS Board of Directors Direction – September 21, 2024

The Board reviewed cost analysis and relevance to the profession and CSMLS members, as well as feasibility in the current transitional climate with CAMLPR. The Board of Directors decided to cease investigation and deployment in British Columbia for Subject Certification (Chemistry) in 2025.

For further information on CAMLPR, see <https://camlpr.org/competency-profiles/>
(Revision September 26, 2024, C. Nielsen)