



***Publication
Reference***

EA-INF/12: 2014

**Benefits and importance
of the participation in
EA highlighted PT schemes**

PURPOSE

This document gives information on the benefits and importance of the participation in EA highlighted PT schemes.

Authorship

This document has been written by the EA Laboratory Committee working group Interlaboratory Comparisons in Testing.

Official language

The publication may be translated into other languages as required. The English language version remains the definitive version.

Copyright

Copyright of EA publications is held by EA. The publication may be copied for resale.

Classification: **Information document**

Date of Publication: **January 2015**

Date of implementation: **Immediate**

Transitional period: **None**

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	4
2. PT PROVIDER COOPERATION.....	4
2.1. IMEP schemes	4
2.2. APLAC schemes	5
3. PT SCHEME SELECTION PROCESS.....	5
4. INVITATION PROCESS.....	5
5. LABORATORY PARTICIPATION IN THE EA SELECTED SCHEMES	6
6. CONFIDENTIALITY	6
7. BENEFITS FOR THE PT PROVIDERS.....	6
8. BENEFITS FOR THE PARTICIPANTS	7
9. EVALUATION PROCESS	7
10. PEER- EVALUATION PROCESS	7

1. INTRODUCTION

Mutual recognition of the competence of accredited testing laboratories is provided by international Multi-Lateral Agreements (MLAs). In order to ensure that confidence can be placed in the effectiveness of the MLAs a number of measures exist. The primary measure used to ensure consistency of the outcome of assessment and accreditation practices between the Accreditation Bodies (ABs) is the Peer Evaluation process. However it is important to consider additional mechanisms that can provide information to support the effectiveness of the MLAs. One such mechanism is to review data from suitable international interlaboratory comparisons (ILCs). If this data demonstrates comparability of results from laboratories accredited by different MLA member ABs then this can provide confidence that the MLA is operating effectively.

EA recognises that many testing laboratories participate in Proficiency Testing (PT) schemes as part of their routine QA measures and that many PT Providers operate internationally. Therefore, in preference to organising its own ILCs, EA seeks to utilise existing PT participation as far as possible to avoid placing an additional burden on laboratories. To this end EA aims to establish cooperation with existing PT Providers to enable data to be extracted and analysed for the purposes of monitoring the effectiveness of the MLA.

2. PT PROVIDER COOPERATION

The PT schemes that are used to monitor the effectiveness of the MLA come from three different sources:

- IMEP schemes
- APLAC schemes
- Schemes from Professional PT providers

2.1. IMEP schemes

The IMEP schemes are provided by IRMM (The Institute for Reference Materials and Measurements) on the basis of an EA-IRMM collaboration agreement. In each IMEP scheme, IRMM kindly invites EA to nominate laboratories for participation free of charge. If a laboratory registers in the scheme without gaining prior approval from the Accreditation body, it will have to cover the participation costs.

In general EA accreditation bodies are allowed to nominate a limited number of participants. Each Accreditation body will set up its own selection process, but the AB will make sure that in the long run no discrimination arises. Priority will clearly be given to laboratories that are accredited for the test proposed. The laboratory is to register itself in the scheme after having received the approval from the AB.

Participants from regional bodies (in particular APLAC and IAAC regions) are also invited to participate in the IMEP schemes.

2.2. APLAC schemes

APLAC (Asia Pacific Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation) regularly organises PT schemes for the laboratories of their region. These schemes are financed by APLAC and EA laboratories are invited to participate in these schemes here also free of charge. For these schemes, also, the AB will set up its own selection criteria and the nomination of the selected laboratories is done by the AB.

Participants from the IAAC region are also invited to participate in the APLAC schemes.

2.3 Schemes from professional PT providers

EA is willing to cooperate with any professional PT provider and will basically use EPTIS as a database when it is looking for a potential PT provider in a specific field. An open invitation will then be sent to all the relevant PT providers listed in EPTIS.

In a specific field EA will not cooperate exclusively with one PT provider only. The PT provider should have participants coming from a significant number of EA MLA for testing signatory members.

For the schemes selected from professional PT providers, the laboratories have to cover the costs themselves if they decide to participate. The laboratories have to register themselves in the scheme. In general, for these schemes, there is no limitation in the number of participants.

3. PT SCHEME SELECTION PROCESS

The schemes proposed by IMEP and APLAC are not planned by EA, but EA will decide if it agrees to propose the schemes to its members. It is therefore possible that in a short time frame, the same laboratories are invited to participate in different schemes.

As the IMEP and APLAC schemes don't cover all the testing fields and EA has no direct influence on the planning of these schemes, EA cooperates with professional PT providers. Specific fields are selected, and a relevant scheme from a professional PT provider that is willing to cooperate with EA is proposed.

4. INVITATION PROCESS

For each scheme selected (around 4-5 /year) an invitation will be sent out to the AB's PT contact person. The latter then sends out the invitation to the relevant laboratories according to each AB's internal procedure.

For the IMEP and APLAC schemes, as there are only a limited number of participants per AB, the AB may have to select, on an objective basis, the laboratories it invites.

For the professional PT schemes, the invitation is usually sent out to all relevant laboratories and there are usually no limitations in the number of participants.

5. LABORATORY PARTICIPATION IN THE EA HIGHLIGHTED PT SCHEMES

Although participation of the accredited laboratories in the highlighted PT schemes is based on a voluntary basis, it is expected that laboratories will be keen to participate unless they have already undertaken other equivalent PT or other quality measures. This being in accordance with ISO/IEC 17025, 5.9.1 and ISO 15189 5.6.3. and subject to routine assessment by the accreditation body.

However, if the laboratory does not have sufficient control measures in place in regard to the test proposed in the PT scheme, in particular because it had not found an appropriate PT scheme, then the laboratory should seriously consider to participate in the highlighted scheme.

In any case, especially if the PT scheme proposed is free of charge, the laboratory is welcome to participate in the highlighted PT schemes as this participation can give some added value to the laboratory.

6. CONFIDENTIALITY

For the IMEP and APLAC schemes, as the accreditation bodies nominate the participants, the names of the participants are known to the accreditation body. The codes of the nominated participants are disclosed to the accreditation bodies for the APLAC schemes. For the IMEP schemes, the codes are given to the EA designated coordinator for global evaluation purposes and each AB that nominated laboratories, receives the codes of its accredited laboratories.

For the PT schemes proposed by the professional PT providers, the identity of the individual participants is not given. The information provided is the total number of accredited participants and the EA members represented.

The aim of the evaluation of the EA highlighted PT schemes is to gain information on the comparability of results throughout the EA community and not the assessment of an individual laboratory. Therefore even though an individual laboratory has an unsatisfactory performance, this will not be followed through by the EA WG ILC in testing nor as a special action by the relevant accreditation body. The assessment of the performance of the individual laboratory will be done following the normal PT assessment procedure of the relevant AB.

7. BENEFITS FOR THE PT PROVIDERS

As the EA highlighted PT schemes are proposed to all the EA accreditation bodies, the PT providers can benefit from a potential increase of participants. This increase should have a positive impact on the performance evaluation.

The cooperation with professional PT providers is not done for commercial reasons, but to guarantee that there is sufficient participation so that statements concerning the comparability throughout EA members can be made.

If any deficiencies are raised following the performance evaluation, the learning points are communicated to all the EA accreditation bodies. The discussion of the learning points, during the assessments, should help the PT providers in their educational process.

As the EA highlighted PT schemes are highlighted to all the EA members and posted in EPTIS, this gives the PT provider the possibility to increase its number of participants.

8. BENEFITS FOR THE PARTICIPANTS

In principle, participation in PT schemes should always be beneficial for the participant. Participation in the EA highlighted PT schemes can give the participant some specific benefits:

- For the IMEP and APLAC schemes, the participation is free of charge.
- An international dimension is given to the performance evaluation.
- A sufficient number of participants should be guaranteed
- Technical improvements arising from the PT schemes are specifically discussed and the AB's are informed of any learning points. These learning points can be used by the laboratories to improve their performance.
- The PT schemes are proposed from competent PT providers
- It is sometimes possible for the participant to only participate in the highlighted round. This can enable the participant to evaluate if a participation in further rounds or other schemes proposed by the PT provider may be relevant.

9. EVALUATION PROCESS

The results of the highlighted PT schemes are used to monitor the effectiveness of the MLA, but they can also be used to highlight specific technical issues if they are detected during the evaluation of the performance.

The technical issues that arise are brought to the attention of the members of the EA laboratory committee and of the EA technical networks. The relevant assessment teams shall be informed of the technical issues and these shall be discussed during the assessment in order to provide an input in the technical improvement process.

10. PEER- EVALUATION PROCESS

The outcome of the highlighted PT schemes can also be used in the EA peer-evaluation process. In this process, it is not the laboratories that are evaluated but the ABs. Based on the highlighted PT scheme, the peer-evaluation team can assess if and how the accreditation body has promoted the highlighted PT scheme.

Although the purpose of the highlighted PT schemes is not to assess the performance of the accredited laboratories of an individual AB, the peer-evaluation team could assess the actions taken by the AB if repeated poor performance is obtained by their accredited laboratories.

If any learning points arise from the scheme, the peer evaluation team can also evaluate how the accreditation body informs the relevant assessors and laboratories of these learning points.