National Laboratory Association – South Africa NPC

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Proficiency Testing Scheme Brochure

Hygiene Swabs

2026

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Background

The NLA – SA is a representative body that evolved from the previous National Laboratory Accreditation service. Following the assumption of overall responsibility for accreditation (including laboratory accreditation) by the South African National Accreditation System (SANAS) during 1998, it was decided that a new independent body should be created. This body, the National Laboratory Association – South Africa (NLA – SA) now looks after the interests of the large number of laboratories in South Africa. The acronym, NLA, which was linked to the previous National Laboratory Accreditation service was retained, both for the purpose of continuity and because it was well-recognised and respected. During 2019/20 the NLA – SA, a Not-for-Profit organisation, restructured Board representation and formed a Board committee which is now named the "Council". This was done to provide for wider input into its strategic intent. The formation of the Council has meant that interests from the government Technical Infrastructure organisations such as NMISA, SANAS, SABS – Standards and the NRCS, are accommodated; as well as various other interests without having to be co-opted on to the Board which was previously required. The NLA – SA's focus is primarily on the representation of the activities, interests and opinions of all members' laboratories. Membership of the Association is voluntary and open to all companies that have laboratories.

The NLA – SA has been accredited as a proficiency testing provider (PTP) according to ISO/IEC 17043, Conformity assessment – General requirements for the competence of Proficiency testing providers, since 2015.

What is Proficiency Testing?

- Proficiency testing is a powerful quality assurance tool for analytical measurement laboratories.
- Samples are distributed to laboratories for analysis, the results evaluated, and a report generated.
- Laboratories should use their routine methods of analysis.
- Proficiency testing should be used as an educational tool to identify and address measurement problems.

Benefits of Proficiency Testing

- Provides a regular independent check on the quality of analytical measurements.
- Enables participants to compare their performance with peer laboratories.
- Offers constructive feedback from the Technical Committee (TC).
- Facilitates the demonstration of competence to accreditation bodies, regulators and customers.
- Enables monitoring of trends, over time, in the quality of measurements.
- Assists in the evaluation of methods and instrumentation.
- Helps educate laboratory staff and their customers.

Why participate in Proficiency Testing?

Many international and national standards emphasise the importance of maintaining environmental quality. To ensure a safe environment, analytical results are frequently used as a measuring tool and have to be accurate and reliable. Participation in a Proficiency Testing Scheme (PTS) provides the opportunity to measure the quality of analysis. It also helps laboratories to meet the requirements of accreditation organisations and assists laboratories to improve their quality control and analytical performance for the benefit of their customers. It provides independent evidence of laboratory performance for both laboratory management and customers.

The Hygiene Swabs PTS offered is included under the scope of accreditation.

Scope of the Hygiene Swabs PTS

Important note: *Proficiency samples should imitate materials or samples that laboratories would normally receive for testing. Since one would not expect all samples received for routine testing to test positive for a specific determinand, the PT scheme programme is designed and planned to cover different technical aspects such as high or low target levels, typical vs non-typical organism appearance, presence of interfering flora, etc. over the span of a year. This means that participants who opt to participate in only certain rounds of the year programme may not be able to cover all their testing needs through participation in this PT scheme.*

Due to limitations in loads that can be used to inoculate the simulated swab samples, the Hygiene Swabs PT scheme consists of only three (3) unique rounds per year. The drawback of this limitation is that no additional rounds with similar loads are available in a year programme to perform follow up testing where needed.

The scheme involves the distribution of freeze-dried swabs to each participating laboratory and consists of three rounds per year. The concentration of the organisms in the samples supplied are unknown and the samples are labelled A and B. Each swab sample comprises of three individual swabs. The swabs provided are a cotton tip swab and a cotton cloth-type swab.

The following tests are included in the scheme:

- Detection: *Campylobacter* species, *Escherichia coli*, *Listeria monocytogenes*, *Salmonella* species, Coagulase positive *Staphylococcus* species, *Clostridium* species, *E. coli* O157 NEW!

- Counts: Total plate count, Total coliform count, Mould count, Yeast count, Anaerobic count, Enterobacteriaceae count, *E. coli* count NEW!, *Listeria monocytogenes* count NEW!, Coagulase positive *Staphylococcus* count NEW!

The format the scheme will be offered in will be as per the table below:

PT Round	Available tests
Round 1: General hygiene checks	Count (/swab): Total plate count, Anaerobic count, Mould, Yeast
Round 2: Gram negative organisms	Count (/swab): Total coliforms, Enterobacteriaceae, *E. coli* NEW! Detection (/swab): *Campylobacter* spp., *E. coli*, *Salmonella* spp., *E. coli* O157 NEW!
Round 3: Gram positive organisms	Count (/swab): *Listeria monocytogenes* NEW!, Coagulase positive *Staphylococcus* spp. NEW! Detection (/swab): *Listeria monocytogenes*, Coagulase positive *Staphylococcus* spp., *Clostridium* spp.

Laboratories are afforded the opportunity to submit up to three sets of results from the one set of samples that they receive, at no additional cost. Additional samples may be purchased (at least 6 weeks prior to the start of the round) if more sample is needed to enable more personnel to participate. **Any additional samples to repeat tests must be ordered within one month after the Final Report has been issued.**

Programme

The programme for the 2026 PTS and the costs involved are as follows:

Round	Distribution date of samples	Price (Excl VAT)	
		NLA – SA members	Non-members
Round 1	16 March 2026	R 8 138 (3 rounds)	R 9 698 (3 rounds)
Round 2	27 July 2026		
Round 3	9 November 2026		

#Prices exclude courier charges to laboratories outside South Africa (courier charges will be added to the above price).
Laboratories outside South Africa will be responsible for payment of any VAT & Duties charges.

Distribution of samples

The samples will be shipped as per the events calendar. The package will reach the participant via a courier service. Instructions on how to prepare the samples are e-mailed to participants at the start of each round.

Participants who prefer to arrange collection of their samples using their own courier company are allowed to do this. This needs to be communicated to the NLA – SA when registering to participate.

Submission of results

Results are submitted online. The submitted data will be downloaded from the web after the due date for results submission. No late submissions will be accepted, unless the laboratory experienced problems and this was communicated to the coordinator and late submission agreed upon by the coordinator before the due date.

Assigned values and performance evaluation

Since it is not possible to assign a single 'target' value for evaluation purposes due to the nature of the proficiency samples, the consensus value will be used as the assigned value. Performance will be evaluated by calculating *z* scores, which represent the performance of the participant relative to all the other participants.

z scores of $< |2|$ indicate acceptable performance of the laboratory. Values outside of these ranges indicate that there is a potential problem with the measurements in the participant laboratory, and that a root cause analysis and corrective action are called for.

Reporting of results

A preliminary report summarising the raw data will be issued within a week after the results submission due date, with the final report being issued 3 - 4 weeks after the due date of each round. ***No changes/corrections will be made after the preliminary report was distributed.***

Recognition for participation

Certificates of participation will be issued annually to indicate participation in the scheme.

Confidentiality

Participating laboratories will be identified by a unique code to ensure confidentiality. Results may be presented on relevant occasions but not to harm any individual or to identify a laboratory.

General

The NLA – SA will review the principles of the scheme annually following feedback received in the annual meeting and survey. Any changes will be adopted during the following year where possible.

How to Join the Scheme

Participation in the PTS is open to all testing laboratories, regardless of location (nationally or internationally) and whether they are accredited or not.

Laboratories wishing to join the scheme should complete the PT Scheme Participation Application Form (NLA-PT-F-01). Note that the persons indicated as the contact and the alternate will receive all communications, including those concerning sample delivery and the reports. The application form should be sent by e-mail (carinnej@nla.org.za) to the scheme coordinator, Ms Carinne Joubert.

Please return the Application form before ***12 January 2026***, after which the participants will be invoiced. Terms of payment are strictly 30 days, unless special arrangements have been made with the NLA – SA finance section.

If you do not want to participate in the proposed series but wish to be informed about future exercises, send an e-mail to the scheme coordinator.

Customer Participation

Comments and suggestions for changes are always welcome from customers on all aspects of the scheme. Participants are invited to attend the annual PT meeting. Details of this meeting will be sent to all participants in advance.

Hygiene Swabs PTS Events Calendar 2026

Event	Date	Responsibility
Mail documents and registration forms for 2026	1 December 2025	PT Provider
Return completed registration forms	12 January 2026	Participants
Despatch Round 1 samples	16 March 2026	PT Provider
Return data for Round 1	7 April 2026	Participants
Distribute preliminary report Round 1	13 April 2026	PT Provider
Distribute final report Round 1	4 May 2026	PT Provider
Despatch Round 2 samples	27 July 2026	PT Provider
Return data for Round 2	17 August 2026	Participants
Distribute preliminary report Round 2	24 August 2026	PT Provider
Distribute final report Round 2	14 September 2026	PT Provider
Despatch Round 3 samples	9 November 2026	PT Provider
Return data for Round 3	30 November 2026	Participants
Distribute preliminary report Round 3	7 December 2026	PT Provider
Distribute final report Round 3	14 December 2026	PT Provider

Please diarise these dates to ensure a successful programme. If any of these dates need to be changed due to unforeseen circumstances, the participants will be notified in advance.