

Bespoke PT:

Tailor-Made Convenience or Meaningful Comparison?

Understanding cost, peer comparison, scheme maturity and the true purpose of proficiency testing

A Technical Perspective by Boxplot Analyser Private Limited – PTP Division, India

Proficiency Testing (PT) is fundamentally an interlaboratory comparison exercise. Its value does not depend only on the PT sample or the test parameter; it also depends on appropriate participants, sound technical planning, statistical evaluation and an objective assessment of laboratory performance.

Laboratories sometimes approach a PT Provider with a request for a bespoke or customised PT scheme designed specifically around their laboratory, matrix, test parameter or method.

While such an arrangement may be technically possible in certain circumstances, Boxplot PTP generally does not consider bespoke PT to be the preferred option where a suitable regular PT scheme is already available.

There are several reasons.

Why Bespoke PT May Not Always Be Advisable

1. Higher cost due to on-demand organisation

A regular PT scheme is normally planned in advance for multiple laboratories. The costs associated with PT item preparation, technical planning, distribution, evaluation and reporting can therefore be shared among participants.

A bespoke PT scheme may require dedicated development, special sample preparation, additional technical work and customised arrangements for a very limited number of participants.

Consequently, on-demand PT is generally more expensive than participation in an established regular PT scheme.

Regular PT: shared programme, shared resources.

Bespoke PT: special requirement, special resources, special cost.

2. Fewer peer laboratories may reduce the strength of comparison

The strength of PT comes partly from meaningful comparison with other laboratories undertaking comparable testing.

A bespoke scheme requested by one laboratory may attract only a small number of participants, or perhaps no sufficiently large peer group at all.

A smaller participant group does not automatically make a PT scheme invalid, but it may place greater limitations on the statistical approach and the extent of meaningful peer comparison.

A regular PT programme generally provides a better opportunity to establish an appropriate participant group.

3. The requested bespoke PT may simply not be available

A PT Provider cannot necessarily create every requested combination of:

Matrix + Test Parameter + Method + PT Item + Schedule

simply because a laboratory requests it.

The Provider must consider technical feasibility, availability of suitable material, sample preparation, homogeneity, stability where applicable, transportation, participant numbers, assigned-value determination and appropriate statistical evaluation.

Therefore, a laboratory's specific requirement may be legitimate, yet the corresponding bespoke PT scheme may not be technically feasible or immediately available.

4. Customisation should not create an expectation of a satisfactory result

There is also a less obvious consideration.

When a laboratory itself requests a PT scheme specifically for its requirement, there can sometimes be an unconscious expectation that the customised exercise should result in a satisfactory performance score.

This may not be intentional, but the perception can arise:

"We specifically requested this PT, so hopefully our result will be satisfactory."

However, that is not the purpose of PT.

The PT Provider's responsibility is to organise an appropriate and impartial assessment—not to design a PT exercise around the expectation of a satisfactory outcome.

A satisfactory result should be an outcome of laboratory performance, not the objective of PT scheme design.

PT should act as a mirror, not a comfort blanket.

5. A bespoke scheme may not have the maturity of a regular PT programme

A regular PT scheme may have been conducted through several rounds. Over time, the PT Provider can accumulate experience relating to sample preparation, homogeneity, stability, participant instructions, technical queries, statistical evaluation and other practical aspects of the scheme.

A newly developed bespoke PT scheme may not yet have this accumulated experience.

This does not mean that every bespoke PT scheme is technically inferior. It simply means that a new, one-off scheme does not automatically have the same maturity and historical learning as an established regular PT programme.

In simple terms:

A regular PT scheme has the benefit of experience. A bespoke PT scheme may be entering its first round.

Why Regular PT Is Generally Preferable

When a suitable regular PT scheme is available, it normally provides several advantages.

Better peer comparison

Participation alongside other laboratories provide a more meaningful interlaboratory comparison.

Better cost efficiency

The technical and operational resources required for the PT exercise are distributed across participating laboratories.

Established technical planning

Regular schemes benefit from planned procedures covering PT items, participant instructions, evaluation and reporting.

Greater scheme maturity

Repeated rounds allow the PT Provider to learn, review and continually improve the programme.

Performance history

Regular participation allows a laboratory to observe its performance over multiple PT rounds rather than relying on one isolated exercise.

Better quality planning

Annual participation in regular PT schemes can become an organised part of the laboratory's quality-assurance programme rather than an on-demand activity.

Bespoke PT Is Not “Wrong”—But It Should Have a Genuine Purpose

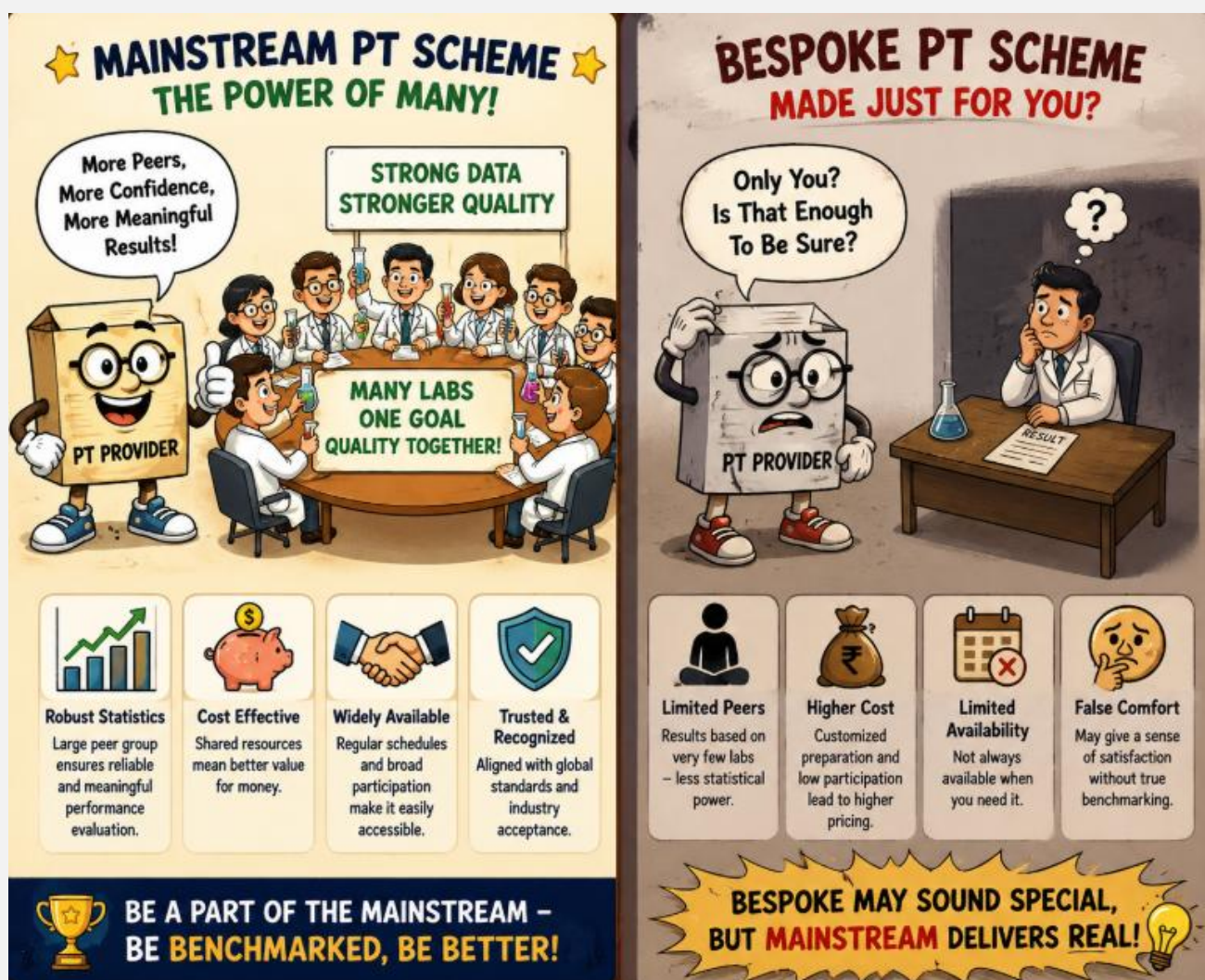
There can certainly be situations where a bespoke or specially designed PT / interlaboratory comparison is justified - *for example*, where a highly specialised test parameter, unique matrix or emerging testing requirement is not covered by an appropriate regular PT scheme.

The important principle is therefore not:

“Never use bespoke PT.”

Rather:

“Do not choose bespoke PT merely for convenience when an appropriate, established regular PT scheme is already available.”



A Perspective of Boxplot Analyser Private Limited – PTP Div.

At Boxplot Analyser Private Limited – PTP Division, our preference is to develop technically meaningful, planned and sustainable PT programmes that can serve an appropriate group of laboratories.

We believe that the objective of PT should not simply be to provide a laboratory with a customised sample.

The objective should be to provide an objective, technically sound and meaningful assessment of laboratory performance.

In one sentence:

If a suitable regular PT scheme is available, choose the established comparison rather than commissioning a customised one—because PT is ultimately about meaningful comparison, not merely customised convenience.

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