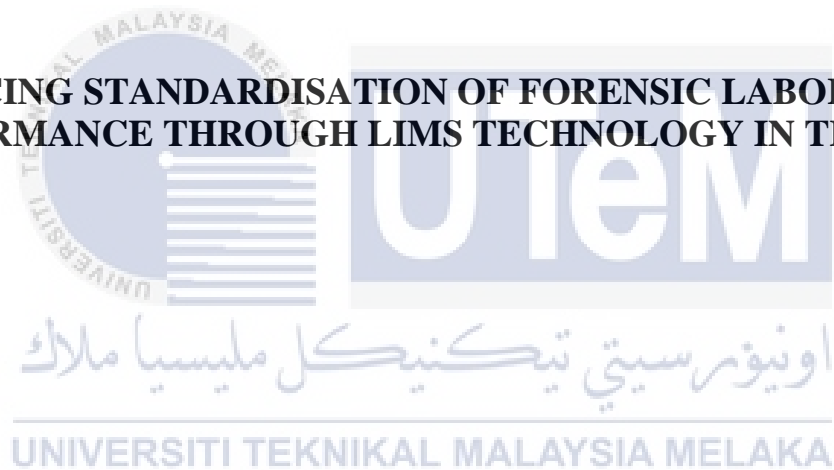




Institute of Technology Management and Entrepreneurship

**ENHANCING STANDARDISATION OF FORENSIC LABORATORY
PERFORMANCE THROUGH LIMS TECHNOLOGY IN THE UAE**



Ali Mohamed Almessabi

Doctor of Philosophy

2022

**ENHANCING STANDARDISATION OF FORENSIC LABORATORY
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ALI MOHAMED ALMESSABI



Institute of Technology Management and Entrepreneurship

UNIVERSITI TEKNIKAL MALAYSIA MELAKA

2022

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis entitled “Enhancing Standardisation of Forensic Laboratory Performance Through LIMS Technology in the UAE” is the result of my own research except as cited in the references. The thesis has not been accepted for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature of any other degree.

Signature



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APPROVAL

I hereby declare that I have checked this thesis, and, in my opinion, this thesis is adequate in terms of scope and quality for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Technology Management and Entrepreneurship



Signature


UNIVERSITI TEKNIKAL MALAYSIA MELAKA

Supervisor Name : Prof Ts Dr Massila Kamalrudin

Date : 13/08/2022

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the inspiring persons towards my life, my dear father and my dear mother who always want me to have the best, for their love and the prayers that they made for me.

...To my wife...

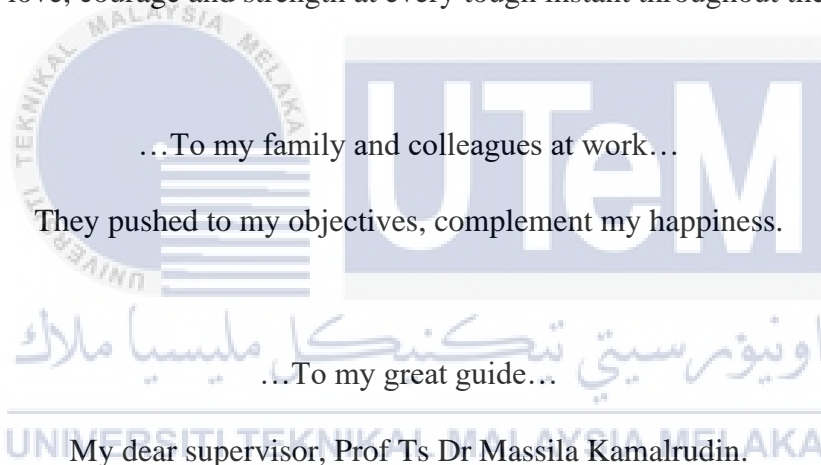
My wife is a wonderful wife, a great companion and so much more in my life. She is always a source of love, courage and strength at every tough instant throughout these years.

...To my family and colleagues at work...

They pushed to my objectives, complement my happiness.

...To my great guide...

My dear supervisor, Prof Ts Dr Massila Kamalrudin.



ABSTRACT

Technology has gained a reputation as a suitable and efficient tool for the analysis, tracking and profiling of forensic evidence. However, the quest to improve efficiency and quality, whilst reducing cost and minimising response time in forensic laboratory activity through the application of technology, lacks the adoption of standardised metrics. In other words, even though standards have been introduced to guide forensic work, errors persist, and cross-laboratory compatibility remains a major issue. Severe cost overruns and performance deviations continue to be experienced, and these have emphasised the need for technology-aided standardisation in diverse scopes of forensics activity. The present research aimed to assess the role of technology in the standardisation of forensic laboratory performance within the various scopes of forensic laboratory information management systems (LIMS) applications such as case management, sample management, staff competency and process automation. Following a critical review of literature, the research focuses on the population of all forensic specialists, technicians and experts in government-owned forensic laboratories across the UAE. The research adopts a quantitative methodological approach in a survey research strategy; the findings are further validated in a quantitative observational research strategy to validate the degree to which the findings may be further revealed within its natural context. Given a population of 2,000 forensic experts and support workers across the UAE, a minimum sample of 323 is estimated, and an actual sample of 646 is employed to allow a 50% non-response rate. A total of 325 actual responses were received and used for the analysis. The structural equation modelling analytical technique is implemented with the help of IBM SPSS Statistics 24 and IBM SPSS AMOS 23. As part of the survey results, Bayesian Markov Chain Monte Carlo (BSEM MCMC) is used to validate the inter-relationships in the primary model to authenticate valid findings. A case of a forensic laboratory in Abu Dhabi was as well observed to further validate the research model. BSEM MCMC validated results indicate that staff competency (Regression weight Estimate $\beta = .814$, p-value < 0.001) and automation (Regression weight Estimate $\beta = .252$, p-value < 0.001) play a significant role in laboratory performance (Multiple correlations $R^2 = .81$, Chi Square (Sig) $\chi^2 = 335.201$, Degree of Freedom $df = 179$). A strong association exists between staff competency and automation (Covariance $R = .426$), even though this does not generally correspond with the other association between case management and sample management (Covariance $R = .374$). The quantitative observation revealed that technology-aided standardisation of lab performance significantly improves staff competency, automation, case management, and sample management. It is concluded that standardisation, with the help of technology, is critical for forensic laboratory performance, and this is true for staff competency and automation areas. However, the orchestration of staff competency and automation must be implemented separately from the contribution of case and sample management to forensic laboratory performance. It is recommended that forensic experts and technology developers pay extra attention to laboratory performance standardisation in the areas of case and sample management, using laboratory information management systems (LIMS) in forensic work. The uniqueness of these scopes of forensic activity does not make it easily correspond with staff competency and automation. Ultimately, the areas of sample and case management prove most challenging to laboratory performance standardisation. Future research may adopt an even versatile methodology to help develop and validate measurement scales for forensic case management, sample management, staff competency, and automation.

MENINGKATKAN STANDARDISASI PRESTASI MAKMAL FORENSIK MELALUI TEKNOLOGI LIMS DI UAE

ABSTRAK

Adaptasi teknologi telah dikenalpasti sebagai alat yang mempunyai reputasi serta sesuai dan efisien untuk analisis, pengesanan dan pemprofilan bukti forensik. Namun begitu, dalam usaha untuk memperkasakan kecekapan dan kualiti, yang mana dalam masa yang sama menuntut pengurangan kos dan meminimumkan waktu maklumbalas terhadap kegiatan makmal forensik penggunaan melalui penerapan teknologi dan penerapan metrik piawai masih lagi kurang. Dengan erti kata lain, walaupun ada piawai yang diperkenalkan untuk memberi panduan kepada kerja-kerja forensik, masih lagi, terdapat ralat yang berterusan serta masalah utama dalam keserasian rentas makmal. Lebih kos yang parah dan penurunan prestasi terus dialami, yang mana perkara ini menyebabkan perlunya penekanan diberikan kepada perlunya bantuan teknologi diseragamkan dalam pelbagai skop aktiviti forensik. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menilai peranan teknologi dalam standardisasi prestasi makmal forensik dalam pelbagai skop aplikasi sistem pengurusan maklumat makmal forensik (LIMS) seperti pengurusan kes, pengurusan sampel, kecekapan kakitangan dan automasi proses. Bepandukan kritikan dalam kajian literatur, kajian ini memfokuskan pada populasi pakar forensik, juruteknik dan pakar dalam makmal forensik milik kerajaan di seluruh UAE. Kajian ini menerapkan pendekatan metodologi kuantitatif dalam strategi kajian tinjauan; yang mana penemuan selanjutnya disahkan dalam strategi penyelidikan pemerhatian kuantitatif untuk mengesahkan sejauh mana penemuan boleh didedahkan lagi dalam konteks semula jadinya. Memandangkan populasi 2000 pakar forensik dan pekerja sokongan di seluruh UAE, sampel minimum 323 dianggarkan dan sampel sebenar 646 digunakan untuk membolehkan kadar tidak respons 50%. Sebanyak 325 respons sebenar diterima dan digunakan untuk analisis. Teknik permodelan analisis persamaan struktur dilaksanakan dengan bantuan IBM SPSS Statistics 24 dan IBM SPSS AMOS 23. Bayesian Markov Chain Monte Carlo (BSEM MCMC) telah digunakan untuk mengesahkan antara hubungan dalam model. Justeru, penemuan kes makmal forensik di Abu Dhabi juga diperhatikan untuk mengesahkan lagi model penyelidikan. Keputusan disahkan oleh SKMM BSEM yang mana menunjukkan kecekapan kakitangan (Regression weight Estimate $\beta = .814$, $p\text{-value} < 0.001$) dan automasi (Regression weight Estimate $\beta = .252$, $p\text{-value} < 0.001$) memainkan peranan penting dalam prestasi makmal (Multiple correlations $R^2 = .81$, Chi Square (Sig) $\chi^2 = 335.201$, Degree of Freedom $df = 179$). Perkaitan yang kukuh wujud antara kecekapan kakitangan dan automasi (Covariance $R = .426$) walaupun pada umumnya perkaitan hubungan lain diantara pengurusan kes dan pengurusan sampel (Covariance $R = .374$). Pemerhatian kuantitatif mendedahkan bahawa penyeragaman prestasi makmal berbantuan teknologi meningkatkan kecekapan kakitangan, automasi, pengurusan kes dan pengurusan sampel dengan ketara dalam pembentangan bukti forensik. Walau bagaimanapun, prestasi terhadap kecekapan dan automasi kakitangan mesti dilaksanakan secara berasingan daripada sumbangan pengurusan kes dan sampel kepada prestasi makmal forensik teknologi memberi perhatian tambahan kepada penyeragaman prestasi makmal dalam bidang pengurusan kes dan sampel, menggunakan sistem pengurusan maklumat makmal (LIMS) dalam kerja forensik. Keunikan skop aktiviti forensik ini tidak menjadikannya mudah sesuai dengan kecekapan dan. Akhirnya, bidang pengurusan sampel dan kes terbukti paling mencabar kepada penyeragaman prestasi makmal. Penyelidikan masa depan mungkin menggunakan metodologi yang serba boleh untuk membantu membangunkan dan mengesahkan skala pengukuran untuk pengurusan kes forensik, pengurusan sampel, kecekapan kakitangan dan automasi.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
DECLARATION	
APPROVAL	
DEDICATION	
ABSTRACT	i
ABSTRAK	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	xii
LIST OF APPENDICES	xiv
LIST OF PUBLICATIONS	xvi
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Background of the research	1
1.3 Problem statement	4
1.4 Purpose of the research	5
1.5 Research questions	6
1.6 Objectives of the research	8
1.7 Scope of the research	8
1.8 Significance of the research	9
1.9 Operational definition	10
1.10 Structure of the thesis	12
1.11 Summary	16
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	17
2.1 Introduction	17
2.2 Theoretical literature review	18
2.2.1 The science of forensics: definition views and theories	18
2.2.2 The need for underpinning theory in forensic science	20
2.2.3 The role of knowledge in solving problems of forensic tests	22
2.2.4 The FoRTE Model of forensic reconstruction – application to trace evidence	27
2.2.5 The roles of knowledge and expertise in forensic science	29
2.2.6 The role of institutions in the generation of knowledge	31
2.2.7 Standardizing knowledge and work in forensic institutions	33
2.2.8 Agents of forensic science and the need for an effective culture	37
2.2.9 Factors of maintaining an effective culture in forensic science	39
2.2.10 The need for standards and standardisation in forensic science	43
2.2.11 Sources of standards: scientific working groups and country standards development	46
2.2.12 International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) on forensics	49

2.3	Systematic literature review (SLR)	52
2.3.1	SLR methodology - software and review approach and tools	52
2.3.2	Planning the review	54
2.3.2.1	Aim and research questions of the systematic literature review	54
2.3.2.2	Search source selection and criteria definition	55
2.3.2.3	Quality criteria	56
2.3.2.4	Database selection	57
2.3.2.5	Inclusion and exclusion criteria for SLR	58
2.3.2.6	Keywords phrase used for search in SLR	59
2.3.3	Conducting the review	60
2.3.3.1	Search for relevant papers for analysis	60
2.3.3.2	Selection of papers that passed inclusion at the search stage	61
2.3.3.3	Extraction of papers that passed inclusion at the selection stage	62
2.3.4	Results of the review	62
2.3.5	Discussion of the SLR results	67
2.3.5.1	Case management standardization of forensic laboratory performance	67
2.3.5.2	Sample management standardization of forensic laboratory performance	71
2.3.5.3	Staff competency standardization in forensic laboratory performance	74
2.3.5.4	Process automation standardization in forensic laboratory performance	75
2.3.6	Conclusion to the systematic literature review	79
2.4	Theoretical framework	79
2.4.1	The need for LIMS in forensic laboratories	80
2.4.2	Key processes of Laboratory Information Management System (LIMS) for forensic laboratories	81
2.4.3	Laboratory Performance of LIMS as key to forensic project reliability	82
2.4.4	Case management standardization and forensic laboratory performance	83
2.4.5	Sample management standardization and forensic laboratory performance	84
2.4.6	Staff competency and forensic laboratory performance	85
2.4.7	Process automation standardization and forensic laboratory performance	87
2.5	Empirical review	88
2.5.1	Empirical review on forensic case management	89
2.5.2	Empirical review on forensic sample management	90
2.5.3	Empirical review on forensic staff competency	91
2.5.4	Empirical review on forensic process automation	93
2.5.5	Empirical review on forensic laboratory performance	94
2.6	Chapter summary	96

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	98
3.1 Introduction	98
3.2 Research philosophy – Positivism	98
3.3 Research design	99
3.3.1 Research method	99
3.3.2 Research approach	100
3.3.3 Research strategy	101
3.4 Data collection and sources	104
3.5 Measurement of variables	105
3.6 The data collection instruments	106
3.6.1 Survey questionnaire	106
3.6.2 Quantitative observation guide	107
3.7 Sample and population	108
3.7.1 Population	108
3.7.2 Sample size and technique	108
3.8 Data collection methods and procedures	109
3.9 Pilot testing and research credibility for survey research	109
3.9.1 Expert opinions and scale validity	109
3.9.2 Pilot and test for reliability	110
3.10 Data analysis	111
3.10.1 Survey data analysis	111
3.10.2 Quantitative observational analysis	113
3.11 Ethical considerations	113
3.12 Chapter summary	114
4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS	115
4.1 Introduction	115
4.2 Preliminary analysis	115
4.2.1 Response rate and data overview	115
4.2.2 Normality tests	116
4.2.3 Outliers' analysis	118
4.3 Demographics	119
4.3.1 Gender	119
4.3.2 Age	120
4.3.3 Education	121
4.3.4 Expertise	122
4.4 Descriptive statistics	123
4.5 Exploratory factor analysis	124
4.5.1 Validity test for EFA	130
4.5.2 Reliability test for EFA	131
4.6 Confirmatory factor analysis	132
4.6.1 CFA research model	132
4.6.2 Validity and reliability of the CFA model	134
4.7 Main structural model	134
4.8 Hypothesis testing	136
4.8.1 The role of technology in standardization of forensic laboratory performance – LIMS in case management	136
4.8.2 The role of technology in standardization of forensic laboratory performance – LIMS in sample management	137

4.8.3	The role of technology in standardization of forensic laboratory performance – LIMS in staff competency	137
4.8.4	The role of technology in standardization of forensic laboratory performance – LIMS in process automation	138
4.8.5	Covariance across areas of technology standardization	138
4.9	Bayesian Analysis	139
4.9.1	Posterior Analysis for H1 to H4	139
4.9.2	Posterior analysis for H5	145
4.10	Chapter summary	152
5.	A CASE OF ABU DHABI FORENSIC LABORATORY	153
5.1	Introduction	153
5.2	Overview of the Abu Dhabi Forensic laboratory	153
5.3	Results of the observation	154
5.3.1	Observation data and set benchmarks	154
5.3.2	Difference between before LIMS Implementation and after LIMS implementation	159
5.3.3	Cross-tabulation between laboratory section and results	160
5.4	Analysis of observational research findings	163
5.4.1	Technology standardization in case management	163
5.4.2	Technology standardization in sample management	164
5.4.3	Technology standardization in forensic process automation	165
5.4.4	Technology standardization in staff competency	167
5.5	Chapter summary	167
6.	DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS	169
6.1	Introduction	169
6.2	Discussions	169
6.3	Implications of research findings	171
6.3.1	Implications to theory	171
6.3.2	Implications to practice	173
6.4	Chapter summary	173
7.	CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	175
7.1	Introduction	175
7.2	Conclusion and key findings	175
7.3	Limitations of the research	176
7.4	Recommendations	176
7.4.1	Recommendations for future research	176
7.4.2	Recommendations to other stakeholders	177
	REFERENCES	178
	APPENDICES	195

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE	TITLE	PAGE
2.1	The differences between explicit and tacit knowledge	24
2.2	Summary of working groups as of 2014 (Same as at 2021)	47
2.3	Summary of PICOC	54
2.4	Research questions of the systematic literature review	55
2.5	Criteria Definition	56
2.6	Quality assessment criteria	56
2.7	Database selection	57
2.8	Inclusion and exclusion criteria	58
2.9	Keywords list for systematic literature review	60
2.10	Search results	61
2.11	Quality assurances	64
2.12	Quality extractions	66
2.13	Components of technology and context analysis of forensic laboratory performance achieved through standardization in case management	67
2.14	Components of technology and context analysis of forensic laboratory performance achieved through standardization in sample management	71
2.15	Components of technology and context analysis of forensic laboratory performance achieved through standardization in staff competency	74
2.16	Components of technology and context analysis of forensic laboratory performance achieved through standardization in forensic process automation	75
2.17	Typical functionality or processes of LIMS	82

2.18	Empirical review of case management in forensic science	89
2.19	Empirical review of forensic sample management	90
2.20	Empirical review of forensic staff competency	92
2.21	Empirical review of forensic process automation	93
2.22	Empirical review of forensic laboratory performance	94
3.1	Justification of research variables in the context of the observational research	102
3.2	Measurement of antecedents	105
3.3	Measurement of dependent variable – forensic laboratory performance	106
3.4	Pilot results and reliability tests - survey questionnaire	110
3.5	Benchmarks for model fit interpretations	112
4.1	Model summary for normality test	116
4.2	ANOVA for normality test	116
4.3	Gender	119
4.4	Age	120
4.5	Education	121
4.6	Area of forensic lab expertise	122
4.7	Descriptive Statistics	123
4.8	KMO and Bartlett's Test - EFA	125
4.9	Goodness of Fit Test - EFA	125
4.10	Total variance explained	126
4.11	Patten matrix	127
4.12	Final pattern matrix	128
4.13	Final total variance explained	129
4.14	Average variance extracted	130

4.15	Factor correlations matrix	131
4.16	Composite reliability and Cronbach Alpha results	131
4.17	Model fit indices - CFA	133
4.18	Validity and reliability tests for CFA factors	134
4.19	Multiple squared correlation and other statistics	135
4.20	Summary of regression weights	136
4.21	Summary of covariance	136
4.22	Posterior means and validation of hypotheses for H1-H4	144
4.23	Posterior means and validation of hypotheses for H5	145
5.1	Before LIMS implementation (original observation data)	156
5.2	After LIMS Implementation	157
5.3	Benchmarks for observation results (Definition of Variables)	158
5.4	Paired samples statistic for the difference between before LIMS and after LIMS	159
5.5	Paired sample correlations	159
5.6	Paired sample test (paired difference)	159
5.7	Cross tabulations between laboratory section and results Before LIMS	160
5.8	Cross tabulations between laboratory section and before LIMS – Chi-Square	160
5.9	Cross tabulations between laboratory section and results After LIMS	161
5.10	Cross tabulations between laboratory section and before LIMS – Chi-Square	161
5.11	Cross tabulations between standardization and results before LIMS	161
5.12	Cross tabulations between standardization and results before LIMS – Chi-Square	162

5.13	Cross tabulations between standardization and results after LIMS	162
5.14	Cross tabulations between standardization and results after LIMS – Chi-Square	162



LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE	TITLE	PAGE
2.1	The contribution of explicit and tacit forms of knowledge to the development of expertise	26
2.2	The Model for Forensic Reconstruction and the Role of Trace Evidence	28
2.3	The epistemological and ontological dimensions of the main forms of knowledge in different organizations	32
2.4	The quality triangle of Forensic science	44
2.5	Illustration of the ISO standards development process	50
2.6	Governing Structure of ISO TC272	51
2.7	Main stages of systematic literature review	53
2.8	Flowchart of SLR Based on PRISMA	63
2.9	Conceptual Framework: Driving forensic laboratory performance through technology-aided standardisation	80
3.1	Research Method Choices	100
3.2	Mind Map multi-method research design	103
3.3	Fieldwork/ Data Collection Process	104
4.1	Histogram with normal distribution	117
4.2	Normal P-P Plot of Regression Standardized Residual	117
4.3	Cooks Distance	118
4.4	Gender	119
4.5	Age	120
4.6	Education	121

4.7	Area of Forensic Laboratory Expertise	122
4.8	Scree Plot - EFA	127
4.9	CFA Model	132
4.10	Structural Model	135
4.11	Posterior Distribution and Trace Plot for case management → Laboratory Performance	140
4.12	Posterior Distribution and Trace Plot for Sample management → Laboratory Performance	141
4.13	Posterior Distribution and Trace Plot for staff competency → Laboratory Performance	142
4.14	Posterior Distribution and Trace Plot for process automation → Laboratory Performance	143
4.15	Posterior Distribution and Trace Plot for case management <-> Sample Management	146
4.16	Posterior Distribution and Trace Plot for case management <-> Staff Competency	147
4.17	Posterior Distribution and Trace Plot for process automation <-> Case Management	148
4.18	Posterior Distribution and Trace Plot for sample management <-> Staff Competency	149
4.19	Posterior Distribution and Trace Plot for process automation <-> Sample Management	150
4.20	Posterior Distribution and Trace Plot for process automation <-> Sample Management	151

LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX	TITLE	PAGES
A	Information sheet	195
B	Informed consent form	197
C	Survey questionnaire	198
D	Frequency statistics	201
E	Factor analysis tables	206
F	Observation guide	208



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1. Almessabi, A., & Kamalrudin, M. (2018). The contribution of technology standardization in forensic process automation to forensic test accuracy: A systematic literature review. ISoRIS 2018.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter starts with the research background, a brief introduction of the role of technology in the standardisation of forensic laboratory performance. The problem statement regarding the topic de-scribed is presented, followed by research questions and research objectives. The significance of the study, scope, and limitation are also mentioned. The chapter ends with the structure of the research.

1.2 Background of the research

Forensic and laboratory practices are going through various levels of automation and efficiencies with new applications of technology (Prilusky et al., 2005). The use of traditional laboratory notebooks has increasingly become inefficient in documenting time, processes, outcomes, data classifications that make multiple samples indexing impossible. In the production of forensic engineering gadgets, the emphasis has been placed on the simplification of work performance (Hendrickson et al., 2005). In these developments, laboratory information management systems (LIMS) and the application of artificial intelligence have increasingly gained the reputation as a suitable and efficient gadget for the analysis, tracking and profiling of forensic evidence (Gall, 2015; Hoelz et al., 2009).

The primary challenge, however, is that it is nearly impossible to obtain a LIMS that can completely satisfy all aspects of forensic laboratory activity. Several technology systems that aspire to offer more than just database and sample integration, tracking and profiling have been proposed, principally given the need to ensure reliability, effectiveness and more seamless laboratory activity (Haas, 2015; Elijah, 2014). The need to ensure efficiency,

quality, minimum cost and minimum response time in forensic laboratory activity is a critical driver of the adoption of technology in forensic sciences (Steinlechner & Parson 2001), and the institution of key standards based on which forensic laboratory performance may be evaluated (Lentini, 2009; Butler, 2015).

The need for standardisation in forensic science activities is not new. According to Lentini (2009), the standards that govern forensic work ranges from aspirational documents such as ethical codes of conduct to procedural instructions on how to maintain quality assurance in forensic work. Standards have proven instrumental to the consistency of practice within and across laboratories at both national and regional levels (Butler, 2015; Wallace et al., 2014). It helps in the facilitation of international certification schemes, ensuring that a country's interest in the development of international standards is clearly communicated (Wallace et al., 2014). Despite the introduction of the standards, significant lapses remain on human errors, reporting, interpretation, among others (Kloosterman et al., 2014). The TC272 under the ISO has published a number of standards, and the UAE remains a key observer of the activities of this committee (Wilson-Wilde, 2018; Butler, 2015).

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is no exception to the global developments of the role of standardisation in forensic performance. On the subject of LIMS, discussions have ensued in the UAE, with a focus on forensic development (Ali, 2016). To deliver for forensic project management, LIMS must be able to analyse data related to specific evidence, submit it to relevant parties for scrutinization based on pre-defined standards, and attribute a unique identification number in connection to the health and physical makeup of the "suspect" or "victim" (Butler, 2015). The lack of a clear standardisation platform for LIMS, however, inhibits malleability of data transfers across forensic stations, operational efficiency of forensic tests and ultimate correctness of results. The complexity and costly nature of

forensic investigations may, however, play a very important role in these developments (Casey, 2005).

Casey (2005) accentuates that effective case and evidence handling, collaboration across system administrators, incident handlers and forensic examiners, and methodical reconstruction are critical to creating a clear picture of the crime. More often than not, a high amount of resources is invested into the reliability of forensic engineered systems (Love et al., 2008). However, in the case of Casey (2005), actors in the early stages of forensic preparation are trained to prepare evidence and monitor capabilities of a threat to arrive at sufficient evidence, but collaboration with network system administrators and forensic examiners was breached due to overlapping roles and lack of common technological standardisation.

In an emphasis on the need for standards, the need for the competent examiner to conduct forensic analysis necessitates that examiner-focused competent post-training is undertaken. However, these training are often paper-based, and the need for re-competency assessment has been argued as essential to evaluate competency performance. To maintain competency levels, LIMS may send a reminder for re-certification to avoid losing competence (Sepulveda & Young, 2013). Conforming to standard operating procedures, with the help of technology, has become essential forensic performance (Bacci et al., 2021), even though the ideal LIMS to achieve this may be highly debated (Sepulveda & Young, 2013).

Love et al. (2008) also add that despite the dedication to reliability, design-induced failures lead to severe cost overruns in forensic engineered systems as the resulting outcomes are not able to perform their designated duties. This has led to a high level of failures in forensic engineered systems, resulting in several challenges in the usage of such technology

systems (Love et al., 2008). There is a need for technology-aided standardisation to significantly improve the workability and effectiveness of forensic engineered systems.

Based on these issues and other factors in the larger scope of the forensic science profession, the present research investigates the perceived performance of the forensic laboratory information management system (LIMS) by building on standardisation across LIMS functionalities associated with case management, sample management, staff competency and process automation. The research builds on the use of Structural Equation Modelling with the complement of the Bayesian Markov chain Monte Carlo (BSEM MCMC) estimation to validate critical findings.

1.3 Problem statement

A wide variety of technological landscapes with varying levels of automation, standards and capabilities have been reviewed and proposed in the recent literature for forensic management (Bacci et al., 2021; Hoelz et al., 2009; Steinlechner & Parson 2001). The central research gap of the research is that no specific technology-aided standardisation model exists for the management and requirement assessments in forensic sciences (Zhai et al., 2020; Mohammed et al., 2021). This has led to persistent errors and challenges of compatibility across laboratories, even after standards are introduced (Zhai et al., 2020). The very operationalisation of laboratory information management systems (LIMS) is heavily diversified (Sepulveda & Young, 2013). Different LIMS support varied interpretation and performance levels (Steinlechner & Parson 2001; Mejia et al., 2020). The time is right that standardisation in forensic laboratory performance is discussed in conjunction with the capabilities of the employed technology or LIMS.

Literature evidence reveals that different systems have been used in an attempt to standardize one or more aspects of forensic activities. An instance is Andersen et al., (2012)

toxicological analysis of whole blood samples in forensics, using technology for sample integration. Guale et al. (2012) automated solid-phase extraction to purify a wide array of analytes also adopts the use of Liquid chromatography time-of-flight mass spectrometry (LC-TOF-MS). Other studies have built on customized LIMS to interpret forensic data; these include Deeb et al., (2014) research on drug abuse, toxicological analysis and therapeutic drug monitoring. This challenge is not new, as the very introduction of standards into forensic work has received several criticisms in the past (Wilson-Wilde et al., 2018). However, with technology brought on board in the standardisation of laboratory performance, keen insight will be revealed on how to reduce concomitant errors that persist even after the introduction of standards and cross-laboratory challenges of standardisation faced in forensic performance.

In other assessments, standardisation in forensic evidence has made no particular reference to any LIMS technology (Raggam et al., 2008; Hoskins et al., 2010) or has reported the use of general technology such as the internet (Aghayev et al., 2008), or vacuum systems (Vickar et al., 2018). Even though each of these technology systems may be appraised in unique contexts, there is an absolute lack of benchmarking on LIMS to permit comparison and cross-evaluation across forensic contexts. The lack of standardisation creates a challenge of incompatible forensic contexts and an “everything fits all” approach to deriving forensic laboratory performance (Mejia et al., 2020). Such a situation is characterized by operational inefficiencies and complexities that inhibit the smooth undertaking of forensic activity.

1.4 Purpose of the research

The main aim of the research is to assess the role of technology in the standardisation of forensic laboratory performance within the various scopes of forensic laboratory information management systems (LIMS) application such as case management, sample