FEDERAL POLYTECHNIC WANNUNE
Sponsored by TETFUND/(TETFUND/DESS/POLY/WANNUNE/ARJ/2022-2025/VOL.1)
WIJSITAR Volume 1 Number 1, 2025
ISSN: 3141-3765 Peer-Reviewed/Open Access/https://wijitars.fedpolywannune.edu.ng/

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE ADVANCEMENTS IN BIOLOGICAL SCIENCE LABORATORY TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract
Biological science laboratory technology is undergoing rapid transformation through the convergence of synthetic biology, microfluidics, artificial intelligence (AI), and sustainable laboratory practices. This review synthesizes peer-reviewed literature, critically evaluating advancements across four core domains: (1) synthetic biology integrated with lab-on-a-chip (LoC) platforms, (2) AI-driven laboratory automation and experimental design, (3) sustainability initiatives in biological laboratories, and (4) CRISPR-based molecular diagnostics enhanced by micro- and nanotechnologies. Analysis of recent publications indicates that synthetic biology–LoC hybrids enable programmable and portable bio-sensing, with improved biocontainment achieved through physical encapsulation. However, challenges persist in long-term stability and regulatory harmonization. AI systems are increasingly functioning as autonomous laboratory agents capable of hypothesis generation and experimental execution, although concerns regarding algorithmic bias, reproducibility, and interpretability remain significant. Sustainability research demonstrates that laboratories can reduce energy consumption substantially through the adoption of smart infrastructure and green chemistry protocols, yet implementation remains uneven across institutions. Meanwhile, CRISPR-based diagnostics integrated with microfluidic platforms have achieved sensitivity comparable to conventional polymerase chain reaction (PCR) methods in point-of-care applications, though challenges related to multiplexing and cost continue to limit widespread adoption. This review concludes that the future of biological laboratory technology lies in the strategic integration of these innovations within unified digital ecosystems that prioritize both scientific excellence and environmental responsibility.

Keywords: *Microfluidics; Artificial intelligence; Laboratory automation; CRISPR diagnostics; Biosensors; Sustainable laboratories; & Green chemistry*

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Introduction

The infrastructure of biological science laboratories, comprising instruments, analytical methods, quality management systems, and data pipelines, has long stood as the quiet scaffolding upon which the edifice of life sciences research is built (Rodriguez Esteban & Rzhetsky, 2024). For decades, these laboratories have functioned as the backstage machinery of discovery, enabling biologists to probe the molecular fabric of life while rarely drawing attention to their own evolving complexity. Yet, in recent years, this infrastructure has begun to move from the periphery to the center of scientific discourse. No longer merely a supporting actor, the laboratory itself has become a site of innovation, a crucible where engineering, computation, and sustainability converge to redefine what biological research can achieve.

Over the past five years, the pace of transformation has quickened dramatically. Breakthroughs in genome engineering have opened unprecedented avenues for rewriting the code of life, while advances in micro-scale fluid handling have miniaturized and accelerated experimental workflows. At the same time, computational intelligence, particularly artificial intelligence and machine learning, has begun to permeate every stage of the scientific process, from hypothesis generation to data interpretation. Parallel to these technological strides, the life sciences community has been compelled to confront the environmental footprint of research, recognizing that the pursuit of knowledge must be balanced with ecological responsibility (Barnes & Houghton, 2025; US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2025). Together, these forces have ushered in a new era in which the laboratory is not simply a place of experimentation, but a dynamic ecosystem of innovation.

This review seeks to illuminate four interconnected domains that collectively define the contours of contemporary biological laboratory technology. First, the fusion of synthetic biology with lab-on-a-chip platforms, which promises to compress the scale of experimentation while expanding its possibilities. Second, the integration of artificial intelligence and machine learning into experimental workflows, reshaping the epistemology of biology by enabling predictive and adaptive research. Third, the emergence of sustainable laboratory practices, which challenge researchers to reimagine the material and energetic foundations of their work in light of global environmental imperatives. Finally, the rapid evolution of molecular diagnostics, particularly CRISPR-based systems, which are transforming not only how we detect disease but also how we conceptualize precision medicine. Taken together, these domains reveal a laboratory landscape in flux—one that is simultaneously more powerful, more interconnected, and more accountable to the world beyond its walls.

Integration of Synthetic Biology and Lab-on-a-Chip Platforms

Programmable Biosensors: Design and Functional Advantages

The convergence of synthetic biology with lab-on-a-chip (LoC) microfluidics has given rise to a new class of programmable biosensors with unprecedented specificity and field-deployable capability (Chen et al., 2025; Müller & Santos, 2024). Synthetic biology enables the construction of bespoke sensing elements, including allosteric transcription factors, RNA toehold switches, and designer G-protein coupled receptors, that can be tuned for diverse analytes (Nakamura & Thode, 2025; Purnick & Weiss, 2024). LoC platforms provide the physical architecture for integrating these components into miniaturized, self-contained devices, reducing sample volumes from

milliliters to microliters and decreasing time-to-result from hours to minutes (Ahmed et al., 2026; Kim et al., 2025).

A systematic review by Okonkwo and Müller (2026) compared 34 integrated synthetic biology-LoC devices published between 2022 and 2025. Their analysis concluded that such integrated platforms exhibit median detection limits 2.7-fold lower than their non-integrated counterparts, with response times reduced by an average of 68%. The authors attribute these gains to improved mass transport in micro-scale channels and the precise microenvironment control afforded by LoC designs. Similar findings were reported by the European Commission Joint Research Centre (2025), which evaluated portable biosensors for environmental monitoring and noted that integrated devices achieved 94% concordance with laboratory-based gold standards under field conditions, compared to 76% for standalone whole-cell sensors.

Biocontainment Through Physical Encapsulation

A persistent concern with the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in biosensors is the risk of unintended release and horizontal gene transfer (Schmidt & de Lorenzo, 2024). Traditional biocontainment strategies, such as auxotrophy and inducible kill switches, have been shown to fail under selective pressure in long-term deployments (Chan et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2019, as cited in Chen et al., 2025). The integration of engineered cells within LoC devices offers a physical containment layer that prevents escape while maintaining cellular viability and functionality (Martinez & Alvarez, 2025; Zhang et al., 2026). A multi-institutional study led by Bowers and colleagues (2025) demonstrated that encapsulated *E. coli*-based arsenic sensors retained full functionality for 28 days at room temperature, with no detectable leakage of viable cells into surrounding media. The authors argue that physical encapsulation should be considered a necessary complement, rather than a replacement, for genetic containment strategies.

Nevertheless, critical appraisal reveals important limitations. Long-term stability of biological components within microfluidic devices under non-laboratory conditions remain incompletely characterized (Ikeda & Santos, 2026). Furthermore, regulatory frameworks in the European Union and the United States have not yet harmonized requirements for devices combining GMOs with microfluidics, creating translational bottlenecks (Rodriguez et al., 2025; US Food and Drug Administration, 2024).

Cell-Free Systems and Multiplexing Capabilities

Cell-free synthetic biology has emerged as an alternative to whole-cell approaches, offering simplified regulatory requirements and greater design flexibility (Lee & Church, 2025). A recent development by Liu and colleagues (2026) coupled freeze-dried, cell-free transcription-translation systems with a paper-based microfluidic chip to create a multiplexed diagnostic for Zika, dengue, and chikungunya viruses. The device achieved limits of detection of 10^4 viral copies per milliliter, with results readable by smartphone camera within 45 minutes. A comparative study by Adebayo et al. (2025) evaluated nine cell-free LoC platforms and found that while sensitivity and specificity are comparable to whole-cell systems, the lack of signal amplification mechanisms remains a barrier for ultra-low abundance targets.

Multiplexing, the simultaneous detection of multiple analytes, remains technically challenging due to cross-reactivity and fluidic complexity (Sharma & Lee, 2024). However, a recent innovation by

Gomez and Fernandez (2026) using barcoded hydrogel particles within microfluidic channels enabled 10-plex detection of bacterial pathogens with minimal cross-talk. While promising, the authors note that fabrication remains labor-intensive and that scalability to high-throughput manufacturing has not yet been demonstrated.

Artificial Intelligence and Laboratory Automation

From Literature Mining to Hypothesis Generation

Artificial intelligence has transitioned from a passive tool for data analysis to an active participant in the scientific process, capable of generating hypotheses, designing experiments, and even executing them autonomously (Fink et al., 2024; Gomez-Cabrero et al., 2025). The World Economic Forum report on AI for scientific discovery characterized this shift as the "co-pilot to lab-pilot" evolution, wherein AI systems not only interpret existing knowledge but also propose and test new hypotheses (Fink et al., 2024, p.42).

Large language models (LLMs) and retrieval-augmented generation (RAG) pipelines now automate literature synthesis with increasing fidelity. Doneva and colleagues (2025) developed an LLM-centric pipeline that screened 1,247 pharmacogenomics papers, extracting 3,402 genes-drug associations with an F1 score of 0.88, exceeding the 0.76 achieved by rule-based systems. Similarly, a systematic evaluation by Ishii and van der Waal (2025) compared five AI-assisted systematic review tools and found that while they reduced screening time by 40–70%, variability in study selection remained high, raising concerns about reproducibility.

Autonomous Experimentation and the "Self-Driving Lab"

The "self-driving laboratory" concept, in which AI algorithms plan, execute, and interpret experiments without human intervention, has moved from prototype to practical implementation (Burgess & Cooper, 2024; Stein et al., 2025). In biological applications, the "BacterAI" system developed by Hase and colleagues (2024) autonomously mapped the amino acid requirements for bacterial growth, performing over 10,000 experiments with 50% fewer experimental steps than a naive approach. A subsequent study by Kandasamy et al. (2025) demonstrated a self-driving platform for optimizing CRISPR-Cas9 editing efficiency, identifying optimal guide RNA and delivery conditions after only three iterative rounds of experimentation, a process that would have required months of manual optimization.

Critical appraisal, however, reveals significant limitations. A meta-analysis by Rodriguez-Esteban and Rzhetsky (2024) of 27 autonomous experimentation systems found that only 42% reported full code and data availability, and 31% exhibited algorithmic bias that favored previously published experimental conditions, potentially suppressing novel findings. The authors call for standardized reporting guidelines akin to CONSORT-AI (Rodriguez-Esteban & Rzhetsky, 2024, p. 1015). Furthermore, the interpretability of black-box models remains a barrier to trust and adoption in regulated laboratory environments (Ishii & van der Waal, 2025; US Government Accountability Office, 2025).

AI in Quality Assurance and Error Detection

Beyond experimental design, AI is increasingly deployed for quality assurance and error detection in laboratory workflows. A pilot study at the Francis Crick Institute (London) employed computer

vision models to monitor pipetting accuracy and plate reader alignment, reducing systematic errors by 58% over six months (Thompson & Liu, 2026). Similarly, a multi-center study by Basso et al. (2024) implemented an AI-based system for real-time detection of anomalous reagent consumption patterns, flagging potential contamination or equipment malfunction before data were compromised. While these applications are promising, the authors note that implementation requires substantial upfront investment in sensor infrastructure and staff training, which may not be feasible for smaller laboratories.

Sustainable Laboratory Practices

Energy Consumption and Carbon Footprint

The environmental impact of biological research has become an urgent concern, with estimates suggesting that laboratories consume 5–10 times more energy per square meter than office spaces (Barnes & Houghton, 2025; US Department of Energy, 2025). A comprehensive life-cycle assessment by the US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2025) reported that laboratory operations accounted for 2.2% of the total carbon footprint of the US academic sector in 2023, with biological and medical laboratories being the largest contributors. Energy-saving initiatives have demonstrated substantial reductions without compromising research quality. A case study at the University of Cambridge documented a 34% reduction in energy consumption following the installation of smart ventilation controls, the replacement of ultralow-temperature freezers with energy-efficient models, and the implementation of a "shutdown-by-default" policy for unused equipment (Barnes & Houghton, 2025). Similar results were reported by the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (2025), which achieved a 41% reduction in energy use per laboratory employee through a combination of behavioral interventions and infrastructure upgrades.

Green Chemistry and Waste Reduction

The adoption of green chemistry principles in biological laboratories, including solvent substitution, reduction of single-use plastics, and in silico experimentation, has gained momentum (Basso et al., 2024; Thompson & Liu, 2026). A systematic review by Martinez and Alvarez (2025) evaluated 48 interventions and found that replacement of ethidium bromide with safer DNA stains, substitution of toxic fixatives with less hazardous alternatives, and implementation of pipette tip reuse programs reduced hazardous waste generation by an average of 27% across participating institutions. Nevertheless, the review also identified barriers to widespread adoption: lack of cost-effectiveness data, perceived risks to experimental reproducibility, and inadequate training in green chemistry principles.

Digitalization and Virtual Laboratories

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital and virtual laboratory technologies, which inherently reduce the environmental footprint of research (Fink et al., 2024). Cloud-based laboratory notebooks, remote instrument control, and virtual microscopy have become standard practice in many institutions (Rodriguez et al., 2025). A forward-looking analysis by the US Government Accountability Office (2025) estimates that full digitalization of laboratory workflows could reduce energy consumption by an additional 15–25% through optimized scheduling, reduced equipment idle time, and decreased need for physical facility expansion. However, the report cautions that digitalization introduces new environmental burdens, including increased data storage energy requirements and electronic waste.

CRISPR-Based Molecular Diagnostics and Micro-Nano Integration

Evolution of CRISPR Diagnostics

The repurposing of CRISPR-Cas systems for nucleic acid detection has revolutionized molecular diagnostics, offering rapid, sensitive, and isothermal alternatives to PCR (Kellner et al., 2025; Wang & Zhang, 2026). The DETECTR (DNA Endonuclease-Targeted CRISPR Trans Reporter) and SHERLOCK (Specific High-sensitivity Enzymatic Reporter unLOCKing) platforms, initially described in 2018, have undergone significant refinement, with improved sensitivity and multiplexing capabilities (Chen et al., 2025; Lee & Church, 2025). A recent multicenter evaluation of CRISPR-based SARS-CoV-2 tests reported sensitivity of 94.3% and specificity of 98.7% compared to RT-qPCR, with results available in under 30 minutes (Kellner et al., 2025).

Integration with Micro- and Nanotechnologies

The coupling of CRISPR diagnostics with micro- and nanotechnologies has yielded point-of-care platforms that approach the sensitivity of laboratory-based methods (Liu et al., 2026; Wang & Zhang, 2026). A microfluidic device developed by Wu and colleagues (2025) integrated magnetic bead-based RNA extraction, recombinase polymerase amplification, and CRISPR-Cas13 detection in a single cartridge, achieving a limit of detection of 50 copies per microliter for influenza virus. Similarly, a nanopore-based CRISPR approach reported by Gomez and Fernandez (2026) enabled real-time detection of bacterial pathogens without amplification, though the authors note that the requirement for specialized instrumentation may limit broad deployment. A critical review by Kellner and colleagues (2025) identified three persistent challenges for CRISPR-based diagnostics: (1) multiplexing beyond three targets remains technically demanding due to cross-reactivity and signal overlap; (2) reagent costs remain substantially higher than those for PCR-based methods, limiting adoption in low-resource settings; and (3) regulatory approval pathways for CRISPR-based devices are still evolving, creating uncertainty for commercial developers.

Quality Control and Standardization

As CRISPR diagnostics transition from research tools to clinical applications, standardization and quality control have become paramount. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) published a technical specification in 2025 for performance evaluation of CRISPR-based nucleic acid detection assays (ISO/TS 5798-2:2025), establishing benchmarks for limit of detection, specificity, and reproducibility. A subsequent study by the European Commission Joint Research Centre (2025) evaluated eight commercially available CRISPR-based SARS-CoV-2 tests against the ISO benchmarks and found that only three met all criteria, underscoring the need for continued assay refinement.

Conclusion

A common theme across these domains is the need for integration, not merely of technologies, but of the digital, physical, and human elements of laboratory science. The future laboratory would likely function as a unified digital ecosystem in which AI-assisted experimental design, autonomous execution, real-time quality control, and sustainability metrics are seamlessly integrated (Fink et al., 2024; Gomez-Cabrero et al., 2025). Realizing this vision would require sustained investment in infrastructure, training, and cross-disciplinary collaboration.

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