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Mathew Gimah * and Luca Eli

Posted Date: 20 June 2025

doi: 10.20944/preprints202506.1676.v1

Keywords: SaaS laboratory systems; Healthcare interoperability; Data integration; Laboratory information systems; Semantic interoperability; Cloud-based healthcare; Health data standards; API-based healthcare integration

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Towards Seamless Data Integration: A Comparative Study of HL7, FHIR, and LOINC in SaaS Laboratory Systems

Mathew Gimah, Luca Eli

Independent Researcher
gimahmathew18@gmail.com

Abstract

In the evolving landscape of healthcare technology, seamless data integration is critical for efficient laboratory information exchange. This study explores and compares three major interoperability standards—Health Level Seven (HL7), Fast Healthcare Interoperability Resources (FHIR), and Logical Observation Identifiers Names and Codes (LOINC)—in the context of Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) laboratory systems. The purpose of the study is to evaluate how each standard facilitates data sharing, system interoperability, and clinical decision-making within cloud-based laboratory infrastructures.

A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining technical feature analysis, performance benchmarking, and qualitative interviews with health IT professionals. HL7 was evaluated for its legacy integration capacity, FHIR for its modern API-based architecture, and LOINC for its semantic consistency in lab results encoding.

Key findings reveal that FHIR offers superior flexibility and developer-friendly integration via RESTful APIs, making it ideal for modern SaaS architectures. HL7, while widely adopted, presents challenges in adaptation due to its rigidity and reliance on older messaging formats. LOINC, when used in conjunction with either HL7 or FHIR, significantly enhances semantic interoperability by standardizing lab test identifiers.

The study concludes that a hybrid approach, leveraging FHIR for data exchange and LOINC for terminology management, presents the most effective strategy for achieving seamless integration in SaaS laboratory systems.

I

Introduction

In the era of digital transformation, the healthcare sector is undergoing a significant shift toward cloud-based solutions, particularly Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) models that offer scalability, cost-efficiency, and remote accessibility. Central to this transformation is the ability of disparate systems—such as Electronic Health Records (EHRs), Laboratory Information Systems (LIS), and clinical decision support platforms—to seamlessly exchange and interpret data. However, achieving interoperability in laboratory data exchange remains a persistent challenge, largely due to the complexity of healthcare data and the diversity of existing standards.

Background Information

Three prominent standards have emerged to address the interoperability gap in healthcare: Health Level Seven (HL7), a long-standing messaging protocol; Fast Healthcare Interoperability Resources (FHIR), a newer web-based standard developed by HL7 International; and Logical Observation Identifiers Names and Codes (LOINC), a coding system for identifying lab and clinical observations. Each of these standards plays a unique role in enabling communication between systems but varies in architecture, implementation ease, and suitability for cloud-based applications.

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Literature Review

Previous studies have examined individual capabilities of HL7 v2.x and FHIR in clinical settings, noting HL7's widespread adoption but also its limitations in flexibility and modernization. FHIR has been praised for its developer-friendly API structure, aligning well with RESTful web services used in SaaS platforms. Research on LOINC has primarily focused on its role in standardizing terminology for lab tests, with limited investigation into how it functions alongside HL7 or FHIR in integrated environments.

However, comparative analyses that evaluate these standards specifically in the context of SaaS-based laboratory systems remain scarce. As more laboratories migrate to cloud-native infrastructures, understanding how these standards interact becomes increasingly crucial.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do HL7, FHIR, and LOINC individually and collectively support interoperability in SaaS laboratory systems?
- What are the technical and operational advantages and limitations of each standard in a cloud-based environment?
- Which combination of standards provides the most seamless and scalable solution for laboratory data integration?

Significance of the Study

This research addresses a critical gap in health informatics by providing a comparative framework for evaluating HL7, FHIR, and LOINC in SaaS-based laboratory ecosystems. By identifying the most effective interoperability strategy, the study aims to inform developers, healthcare providers, and policy makers on best practices for laboratory data integration. The findings could accelerate the adoption of interoperable SaaS platforms, ultimately improving clinical workflows, reducing redundancies, and enhancing patient care outcomes.

II

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a holistic understanding of how HL7, FHIR, and LOINC function within SaaS-based laboratory systems. The quantitative component focused on technical benchmarking and performance metrics of the standards in simulated SaaS environments. The qualitative component involved expert interviews and content analysis to capture user experiences, implementation challenges, and contextual insights.

Participants or Subjects

The participants included:

1. Health IT professionals (n=10), including software architects and developers involved in implementing interoperability standards.
2. Laboratory system administrators (n=6) from cloud-based laboratory service providers.
3. Healthcare interoperability consultants (n=4) with direct experience integrating HL7, FHIR, and/or LOINC across systems.
4. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevant expertise and practical experience with the studied standards.

Data Collection Methods

 doi:10.20944/preprints202506.1676.v1

1. Technical Assessment: Comparative evaluations were conducted by simulating data exchange scenarios using HL7 v2.x messages, FHIR RESTful APIs, and LOINC-coded lab test records in a mock SaaS environment. Performance indicators such as data latency, success rate, and schema compliance were measured.
2. Semi-Structured Interviews: Experts were interviewed using a predefined question guide focusing on implementation ease, integration challenges, data quality, and scalability.
3. Document Review: Supplementary documentation, including HL7 implementation guides, FHIR specifications, and LOINC usage manuals, were analyzed to compare standard maturity and ecosystem support.

Data Analysis Procedures

- Quantitative data (e.g., API response time, error rates) were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) and comparative visualizations.
- Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and insights related to interoperability success factors.

A comparative matrix was created to synthesize findings across the three standards, focusing on criteria such as scalability, semantic consistency, ease of integration, and adaptability to SaaS platforms.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board (IRB) affiliated with the research institution. All participants provided informed consent, and participation was voluntary. Interview data were anonymized to protect the identity of respondents, and all digital data were securely stored in compliance with data protection regulations such as HIPAA and GDPR, where applicable. No patient data were used in the study.

III

Results

The findings from both technical evaluations and qualitative interviews revealed distinct performance and integration characteristics for HL7, FHIR, and LOINC within SaaS laboratory environments.

Technical Performance

FHIR demonstrated superior technical performance compared to HL7. It achieved significantly lower average response times and a higher success rate during simulated data exchange scenarios. FHIR's RESTful API-based architecture allowed for faster and more reliable communication with SaaS platforms. In contrast, HL7 exhibited higher latency and error rates, largely due to the complexity of its message structure and the need for custom parsing logic.

LOINC, as a terminology standard rather than a data exchange protocol, was not directly measured for performance in data transmission. However, its role in enabling semantic consistency was evident, as it standardized the identification of laboratory test results across all formats.

Qualitative Insights

Interviews with IT professionals, developers, and lab administrators highlighted differing perceptions of the three standards. HL7 was recognized for its widespread adoption in legacy systems but was often described as cumbersome to implement in cloud-native environments. FHIR, by contrast, was praised for its ease of implementation, compatibility with modern web technologies, and reduced need for middleware or message brokers.

LOINC was consistently identified as essential for achieving semantic interoperability. Experts noted that while HL7 and FHIR manage data transport, only LOINC ensures that clinical meanings are preserved across systems by standardizing test codes and result identifiers.

Integration Scenario Testing

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Across common integration scenarios—such as submitting lab results, retrieving patient data, and synchronizing test catalogs—FHIR required the least amount of customization and encountered the fewest integration issues. HL7 frequently produced mapping errors and required additional transformation layers to align with SaaS system architectures. When paired with LOINC, both HL7 and FHIR benefited from improved data consistency, but the FHIR-LOINC combination proved the most effective overall.

Summary of Key Results

FHIR provided the most efficient and reliable integration pathway for SaaS laboratory systems, outperforming HL7 in terms of speed, success rate, and developer usability.

HL7, while still widely used, posed significant challenges due to its rigid structure and reliance on older communication paradigms.

LOINC played a critical supporting role in standardizing lab test identifiers, enabling consistent interpretation of laboratory data when integrated with either HL7 or FHIR.

A combined FHIR and LOINC approach emerged as the most seamless solution for modern laboratory data interoperability within cloud-based platforms.

IV

Discussion

Interpretation of Results

The results of this study indicate that FHIR, when combined with LOINC, offers the most effective solution for achieving seamless data integration in SaaS laboratory systems. FHIR's web-based architecture aligns well with the cloud-native nature of SaaS, providing low-latency communication, high success rates, and ease of implementation. In contrast, HL7, though still prevalent in legacy systems, showed higher error rates and required more complex integration efforts, making it less suitable for modern cloud environments. LOINC played a critical supporting role by enabling semantic interoperability, allowing consistent interpretation of lab results regardless of the data transport standard used.

Comparison with Existing Literature

These findings are consistent with previous research that has highlighted FHIR's advantages over HL7 in terms of flexibility, scalability, and developer support. Studies such as Mandel et al. (2016) and Bender & Sartipi (2013) have similarly emphasized FHIR's suitability for modern healthcare applications, particularly those built on RESTful principles. LOINC's value as a universal coding system for laboratory tests has also been affirmed in prior literature, including work by Vreeman et al. (2012), which underscores its importance in achieving true semantic interoperability. However, few prior studies have specifically focused on the interplay between these standards in SaaS contexts, a gap this study helps to address.

Implications of Findings

The implications of this research are significant for healthcare software vendors, laboratory service providers, and policy makers. For vendors, the findings support the prioritization of FHIR and LOINC when designing interoperable SaaS-based laboratory systems. The use of FHIR can simplify API development, reduce integration timelines, and enhance performance in distributed environments. LOINC ensures data consistency and interpretability, which is critical for downstream applications such as analytics, clinical decision support, and patient-facing platforms.

For healthcare institutions transitioning to the cloud, adopting FHIR and LOINC together may minimize long-term maintenance costs and reduce dependence on proprietary or legacy integration solutions. On a broader level, the findings support national and international efforts to standardize health data exchange using modern, open standards.

Limitations of the Study

While the study offers valuable insights, it has several limitations. First, the technical assessments were conducted in simulated environments and may not fully capture the variability of real-world deployments. Second, the sample size for qualitative interviews was limited, which may

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restrict the generalizability of stakeholder insights. Third, the study did not include detailed cost analyses or regulatory considerations, which can be critical factors in actual adoption decisions. Lastly, the exclusion of emerging standards or proprietary APIs used by specific vendors may overlook relevant alternative approaches.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should expand the sample size and include longitudinal studies in live healthcare environments to validate these findings. Studies comparing implementation costs, regulatory compliance factors, and patient outcomes linked to different interoperability strategies would provide a more comprehensive picture. Additionally, examining how these standards integrate with emerging technologies—such as AI-driven lab analytics, blockchain for audit trails, or mobile-first health applications—would help anticipate the next generation of interoperability needs in laboratory systems.

V

Conclusion

This study provides a comparative analysis of HL7, FHIR, and LOINC standards in the context of SaaS laboratory systems, highlighting their distinct roles and capabilities in achieving seamless data integration. The findings demonstrate that FHIR, with its modern API-driven design, offers superior performance and ease of integration in cloud-based environments compared to the legacy HL7 standard. Meanwhile, LOINC remains indispensable for semantic interoperability, ensuring consistent and accurate identification of laboratory test results.

Taken together, the combination of FHIR for data exchange and LOINC for terminology management emerges as the most effective strategy for enabling scalable, reliable, and semantically coherent interoperability within SaaS laboratory platforms.

Final thoughts emphasize the necessity for healthcare organizations and technology vendors to adopt these modern standards proactively to keep pace with the growing demand for efficient, cloud-native healthcare data systems.

Recommendations include prioritizing the integration of FHIR and LOINC in future laboratory SaaS solutions, investing in developer training for these standards, and encouraging collaboration among stakeholders to promote widespread adoption. Further research and real-world implementations will be essential to refine best practices and address evolving interoperability challenges in healthcare.

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