

**PREPARATION, CHARACTERISATION AND  
MICROMECHANICAL MODELLING OF RESIN  
TRANSFER MOULDED NONWOVEN KENAF  
FIBRE/EPOXY COMPOSITES**

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**PREPARATION, CHARACTERIZATION AND MICROMECHANICAL  
MODELLING OF RESIN TRANSFER MOULDED NONWOVEN KENAF  
FIBRE/EPOXY COMPOSITES**

**by**

**ANDRE NINGKAN GADUAN**

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## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

	<b>Page</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</b>	ii
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>	iii
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b>	viii
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	ix
<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</b>	xii
<b>LIST OF SYMBOLS</b>	xiii
<b>ABSTRAK</b>	xv
<b>ABSTRACT</b>	xvii
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</b>	
1.1 Overview	1
1.2 Problem Statements	4
1.3 Research Objectives	6
1.4 Thesis Outline	7
<b>CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	
2.1 Thermoset polymers	8
2.1.1 Introduction	8
2.1.2 Epoxy	8
2.2 Natural fibres	10
2.2.1 Introduction	10
2.2.2 Kenaf fibre	13
2.2.3 Nonwovens	15

2.2.4	Preparation of nonwovens	17
2.3	Natural fibre composites	20
2.3.1	Introduction	20
2.3.2	Kenaf fibre composites	22
2.3.3	Resin transfer moulding	25
2.3.4	Effect of fibre loading on the properties of composites	28
2.4	Theoretical modelling of composites	31
2.4.1	Elastic anisotropy of natural fibre	31
2.4.2	Prediction of tensile modulus	34
2.4.2.1	Tsai-Pagano	36
2.4.2.2	Manera	37
2.4.2.3	Cox-Krenchel	37
2.4.3	Prediction of tensile strength	39
2.4.3.1	Hirsch	40
2.4.3.2	Bowyer-Bader	41
2.4.4	Micromechanics analysis of composites	42
2.5	Finite element analysis of composites	43

### **CHAPTER THREE: MATERIALS AND METHADODOLOGY**

3.1	Materials	46
3.1.1	Nonwoven kenaf fibre	46
3.1.2	Epoxy resin and hardener	46
3.1.3	Acetone	46
3.2	Preparation of nonwoven/polymer composites	47
3.2.1	Mould setup	48

3.2.2	Repriming	49
3.2.3	Recirculation	49
3.2.4	Injection	49
3.2.5	Curing	50
3.2.6	Demoulding	50
3.2.7	Finishing	50
3.3	Characterisation of physical properties of nonwoven kenaf fibre	51
3.3.1	Length and diameter distribution	51
3.3.2	Areal density	51
3.3.3	Breaking force	51
3.4	Anisotropic behaviour of single kenaf fibre	52
3.4.1	Longitudinal tensile properties	52
3.4.2	Transverse tensile modulus	52
3.5	Characterisation of epoxy and NKFE composites	54
3.5.1	Density, fibre volume fraction and theoretical void content	54
3.5.2	Tensile test	55
3.5.3	Flexural test	56
3.5.4	Fracture toughness	57
3.5.5	Morphological properties	57
3.5.6	Dimensional stability	58
3.5.7	Finite element analysis	58
3.6	Research summary	58

## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

4.1	Introduction	60
4.2	Characterisation of single and nonwoven kenaf fibre	60
4.2.1	Aspect ratio	61
4.2.2	Longitudinal tensile strength	62
4.2.3	Elastic anisotropy	64
4.2.4	Areal density and breaking force of nonwoven KF	66
4.3	Characterisation of physical properties and mechanical properties for epoxy and nonwoven KF/epoxy composites	68
4.3.1	Fibre volume fraction, density and theoretical void content	68
4.3.2	Tensile properties	72
4.3.3	Flexural properties	76
4.3.4	Fracture toughness	78
4.3.5	Fracture surface morphology	80
4.3.6	Dimensional stability	83
4.4	Theoretical modelling of nonwoven kenaf fibre/epoxy composites	85
4.4.1	Prediction of tensile modulus	85
4.4.2	Prediction of Poisson's ratio	89
4.4.3	Prediction of tensile strength	91
4.4.4	Micromechanics analysis	95
4.5	Case study: Finite element analysis (FEA) of spare wheel cover	100

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

5.1	Conclusions	111
5.2	Recommendations for future research	113

<b>REFERENCES</b>	110
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## **APPENDICES**

Appendix A [Determination of  $V_f$  of UKFE composites]

Appendix B [Length of pre-crack and shape factor for fracture toughness test]

Appendix C [Equation for calculating the mean and standard deviation of fibre length and diameter]

Appendix D [FEA of spare wheel cover for NKFE at 0.15 and 0.31  $V_f$ ]

## **LIST OF PUBLICATIONS**



## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 2.1      Production of natural fibre composites (biocomposites) in the European Union in 2012 and 2020 forecast (in tonnes) (Carus et al., 2015)	11
Table 2.2      Typical properties of common natural and synthetic fibres (Mohanty et al., 2005)	13
Table 2.3      Tensile and flexural properties of natural fibre composites (Chen et al., 2005)	23
Table 2.4      Summary of efficiency factors from previous studies	43
Table 3.1      Properties of epoxy resin and hardener	47
Table 4.1      Properties of single KF	62
Table 4.2      Fracture toughness of epoxy and its composites and the average time taken to reach break point (s)	78
Table 4.3      Water absorption and thickness swelling of neat epoxy and NKFE composites after 24 hours water immersion	84
Table 4.4 $E_{11}$ and $E_{22}$ at different fibre volume fraction, $V_f$	87
Table 4.5      Critical tensile strength for each neat epoxy sample	93
Table 4.6      Calculated efficiency factors and fibre orientation limit angles under tensile and flexural mode	97
Table 4.7      Calculated efficiency factors and fibre orientation limit angles under tensile mode for samples $0^\circ$ and $90^\circ$ from the needle-punching direction	99
Table 4.8      Materials properties used in the Abaqus CAE 6.12	101
Table 4.9      The resultant maximum stress, maximum deflection and safety factor of the spare wheel cover made from various material composition	109

## LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 2.1	Chemical structure of cellulose 11
Figure 2.2	Nonwoven kenaf fibre 16
Figure 2.3	Basic principle of needle-punching 19
Figure 2.4	Consumption of natural fibre composites in North America (Total: 31000 tonnes) (Suddell and Evans, 2005) 21
Figure 2.5	Nonwoven composites in door and seat back panel for automotive parts 22
Figure 2.6	Comparison of (a) tensile and (b) flexural strength of kenaf/PP-MAPP composites to other composites (Zampaloni et al., 2007; Akil et al., 2011) 25
Figure 2.7	Schematic diagram of RTM machine 26
Figure 2.8	Tensile strength of randomly oriented short fibre banana/polyester composites (Poathan et al., 1997) 28
Figure 2.9	3D view of fibre model with 2D view of projected layers (Hearle and Sparrow, 1979) 32
Figure 2.10	Experimental and theoretical elastic modulus computed by the Tsai-Pagano model against volume fraction of hemp strands (Espinach et al., 2013) 34
Figure 2.11	Effect of fibre content on the composite tensile modulus (♦ Cox-Krenchel model; Δ experimental) (Pervaiz et al., 2006) 35
Figure 2.12	Variation of experimental and theoretical tensile strength values of randomly oriented composites as a function of the volume fraction of fibres. 40
Figure 3.1	Basic flowchart of composites preparation 47
Figure 3.2	Mould setup of RTM machine 48
Figure 3.3	Schematic diagram of the fabrication of UKFE composites for $E_{f2}$ prediction 53
Figure 3.4	Cutting direction of the composites into tensile test samples 56

Figure 3.5	Strain gage placement on the tensile test specimen	56
Figure 3.6	Overall research flowchart	59
Figure 4.1	Fibre length distribution	61
Figure 4.2	Fibre diameter distribution	62
Figure 4.3	Typical stress-strain curve of single KF	63
Figure 4.4	The elastic modulus of UKFE composite perpendicular to the fibre direction ( $E_C$ ) and the predicted KF transverse modulus using Tsai-Hahn model ( $E_{f2}$ ) presented as a function of temperature	65
Figure 4.5	Areal density ( $\text{g/m}^2$ ) and breaking force (N) of nonwoven KF at $0^\circ$ and $90^\circ$ to the needle-punching direction	67
Figure 4.6	Fibre volume fraction, $V_f$ at different nonwoven KF loading	68
Figure 4.7	Density of epoxy and its composites	69
Figure 4.8	Void contents of composites	70
Figure 4.9	(a) Needle path in nonwoven KF produced by needle-punching process and (b) cross section of nonwoven KF showing the mechanical fibre interlocking	71
Figure 4.10	Tensile strength of epoxy and its composites at different $V_f$	73
Figure 4.11	Tensile modulus of epoxy and its composites at different $V_f$	74
Figure 4.12	Optical microscope image of nonwoven KF mat	74
Figure 4.13	Elongation at break of epoxy and its composites at different $V_f$	75
Figure 4.14	Flexural strength of epoxy and NKFE composites at different $V_f$	77
Figure 4.15	Flexural modulus of epoxy and NKFE composites at different $V_f$	77
Figure 4.16	Typical load versus extension curve of epoxy and NKFE composites at different $V_f$ (arrows indicate “pop in”)	79

Figure 4.17	SEM micrographs fractured surface of (a) epoxy and NKFE composites at (b) 0.15 $V_f$ , (c) 0.31 $V_f$ and (d) 0.42 $V_f$ of nonwoven KF	81
Figure 4.18	Experimental and predicted tensile modulus of NKFE composites at different $V_f$	88
Figure 4.19	Experimental and predicted Poisson's ratio of NKFE composites at different $V_f$	90
Figure 4.20	Typical stress-strain curve for epoxy and single KF	93
Figure 4.21	Experimental and theoretical tensile strength of epoxy and NKFE composites at different $V_f$ .	94
Figure 4.22	Elastic modulus against fibre volume fraction, $V_f$	98
Figure 4.23	Tensile modulus against fibre volume fraction, $V_f$	99
Figure 4.24	(a) Typical spare wheel cover of a sedan's trunk and (b) commercial spare wheel cover used in the study	100
Figure 4.25	Illustration of (a) point of fixtures (orange arrows), application and direction of forces (pink arrows) as well as the (b) mesh of the spare wheel cover.	102
Figure 4.26	(a) The resultant stress and (b) deflection counter of the commercial spare wheel cover	103
Figure 4.27	(a) The resultant stress and (b) deflection contour of the spare wheel cover made from neat epoxy	105
Figure 4.28	(a) The resultant stress and (b) deflection contour of the spare wheel cover made from NKFE composite (0.42 $V_f$ )	106

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Acrylonitrile Butadiene Styrene
CP300	Biodegradable Starch/PCL Resin
DMA	Dynamic Mechanical Analysis
FEA	Finite element analysis
GF	Glass Fibre
HDPE	High Density Polyethylene
KF	Kenaf Fibre
MAPP	Maleated Polypropylene
NKFE	Nonwoven Kenaf Fibre/Epoxy
PA66	Polyamide-66
PBT	Polybutylene Terephthalate
PHBV	Poly(3-hydroxybutyrate-co-3-hydroxyvalerate)
PLLA	Poly-L-Lactide
PP	Polypropylene
ROM	Rule of Mixture
RTM	Resin Transfer Moulding
SEM	Scanning Electron Microscopy
SF	Safety factor
SGW	Stoneground Wood
2D	Two-dimension
3D	Three-dimension

## LIST OF SYMBOLS

$A_w$	Areal Weight
$l/d$	Aspect Ratio (length/diameter)
cm/day	Centimeter per day
cm <sup>2</sup>	Centimeter square
$E_C$	Composite Elastic Modulus
$E_{11}$	Composite Longitudinal Modulus
$G_C$	Composite Shear Modulus
$\sigma_C$	Composite Tensile Strength
$E_{22}$	Composite Transverse Modulus
$l_C$	Critical Fibre Length
°C	Degree Celcius
°C/min	Degree Celcius per minute
$\rho$	Density
$\eta_e$	Efficiency Factor (Cox-Krenchel)
$\eta_l$	Fibre Length Distribution Factor
$K_2$	Fibre Length Factor (Bowyer-Bader)
$E_{f1}$	Fibre Longitudinal Young's modulus
$\eta_o$	Fibre Orientation Distribution Factor
$K_1$	Fibre Orientation Factor (Bowyer-Bader)
$\alpha_o$	Fibre Orientation Limit Angle
$\sigma_f$	Fibre Tensile Strength
$E_{f2}$	Fibre Transverse Young's Modulus
$V_f$	Fibre Volume Fraction

$K_{IC}$	Fracture Toughness
GPa	Gigapascal
$T_g$	Glass Transition Temperature
g	gram
$\text{g/m}^3$	Gram per cubic meter
h	Hour
$l$	Length
$E_m$	Matrix Elastic Modulus
$\sigma_m'$	Matrix Stress corresponding to Fibre Failure Strain
$\sigma_m$	Matrix Tensile Strength
MJ	Megajoule
MPa	Megapascal
$\mu\text{m}$	Micrometer
$\text{mm}^3$	Millimeter cubic
min	minute
$\chi_i$	Packing of fibres in the composites
%	Percentage
$\nu$	Poisson's Ratio of Matrix
$r$	Radius
$\zeta$	Shape Fitting Parameter
$\beta$	Shear parameter (Coefficient of stress concentration rate at fibre's end)
atm	Standard Atmosphere
$\eta$	Stress Partitioning Factor (Tsai-Hahn)
$V_V$	Void Content

**PENGHASILAN, PENCIRIAN DAN PEMODELAN MIKROMEKANIK  
KOMPOSIT GENTIAN KENAF TIDAK TERANYAM/EPOKSI  
DISEDIAKAN MELALUI PENGACUAN PEMINDAHAN RESIN**

**ABSTRAK**

Penggunaan gentian semulajadi sebagai penguat di dalam sistem komposit semakin meningkat berikutan peningkatan kesedaran alam sekitar dan kelebihan-kelebihan yang dimiliki seperti kekuatan dan modulus spesifik yang tinggi dan juga bersifat mesra alam. Dalam kajian ini, komposit gentian kenaf tidak teranyam/epoksi (NKFE) telah dihasilkan melalui proses pengacuan pemindahan resin (RTM). Kesan pecahan isipadu gentian ( $V_f$ ) dan kesan arah jarum-pembenam terhadap sifat-sifat tegangan komposit telah dikaji. Kekuatan dan modulus tertinggi dicapai pada kandungan gentian ( $V_f$ ) sebanyak 0.42. Kajian juga mendapati komposit menunjukkan tegangan isotropi. Selain itu, kesan pembebanan gentian terhadap sifat fleksur dan ketahanan retakan komposit telah diselidik. Kajian mendapati keputusan tertinggi dicapai pada beban gentian ( $V_f$ ) sebanyak 0.42. Graf tipikal beban melawan sesaran dan imej-imej mikroskop pengimbas elektron telah menunjukkan bahawa peningkatan kepada ketahanan retakan komposit adalah disebabkan kejadian penyerapan tenaga melalui gentian-gentian kenaf (KF). Disamping itu, kajian ini telah menekankan kepentingan anisotropi sifat kekenyalan gentian didalam menghasilkan ramalan sifat modulus tegangan yang tepat dimana kedua-dua modulus gentian membujur ( $E_{fl}$ ) dan



melintang ( $E_{f2}$ ) telah dikenalpasti. Kajian mendapati gentian kenaf mempunyai anisotropi modulus yang tinggi dimana  $E_{f1}$  adalah sebanyak 26.06 GPa manakala  $E_{f2}$  sebanyak 2.50 GPa. Analisa mikromekanik menggunakan model Cox-Krenchel pula membolehkan parameter-paramater mikromekanik dikenalpasti. Analisa tersebut telah membuktikan kesesuaian model tersebut ke atas komposit NKFE dimana faktor-faktor kecekapan yang dihitung adalah sebanding dengan nilai keputusan kajian-kajian sebelum ini. Analisa tersebut juga telah membuktikan bahawa gentian kenaf (KF) tidak teranyam terdiri daripada gentian-gentian berhaluan rambang yang bertanggungjawab kepada isotropi tegangan komposit. Tambahan pula, jumlah kandungan gentian dan juga mod ujian (tegangan ataupun fleksur) tidak mempunyai sebarang pengaruh yang ketara terhadap faktor kecekapan komposit. Akhir sekali, analisis tegangan penutup tayar ganti menggunakan program komputer analisis unsur terhingga menunjukkan komposit NKFE pada kandungan gentian sebanyak 0.42 ( $V_f$ ) mempunyai faktor keselamatan, kekuatan spesifik dan modulus spesifik yang tertinggi sekali.

# **PREPARATION, CHARACTERISATION AND MICROMECHANICAL MODELING OF RESIN TRANSFER MOULDED NONWOVEN KENAF FIBRE/EPOXY COMPOSITES**

## **ABSTRACT**

There has been a rapid growth in the utilisation of natural fibre as reinforcement in composites driven by environmental concerns and the advantages they offer such as high specific strength and moduli, and also are environment-friendly. In this study, nonwoven kenaf fibre/epoxy (NKFE) composites have been fabricated using resin transfer moulding (RTM). The effect of kenaf fibre (KF) volume fraction ( $V_f$ ) and needle-punching directions on the mechanical properties of the composites have been investigated. The highest tensile strength and modulus were attained at 0.42  $V_f$  and it was found that the composites exhibit tensile isotropy. Optimum flexural properties and fracture toughness were also achieved at 0.42  $V_f$ . The typical load versus displacement graph and scanning electron microscopy (SEM) images of epoxy and NKFE composites revealed that the improvements in the fracture toughness was due to the energy absorbing events caused by the addition of fibres. This study also addresses the importance of fibre elastic anisotropy in the accurate predictions of composite tensile modulus in which both longitudinal ( $E_{f1}$ ) and transverse ( $E_{f2}$ ) fibre modulus were identified. KF has proven to be highly anisotropic whereby  $E_{f1}$  and  $E_{f2}$  were found to be 26.06 GPa and 2.50 GPa, respectively.

Meanwhile, micromechanics analysis by Cox-Krenchel model allows the determination of micromechanical parameters of the composites. The analysis also proved the applicability of the model for NKFE composites as the calculated efficiency factors were comparable to the values from previous literatures. Moreover, the analysis verified that the nonwoven KF consists of randomly-oriented fibres which were responsible for the tensile isotropy. In addition,  $V_f$  and testing modes (tensile or flexural) show no significant effect on the composite's efficiency factors. Lastly, the static stress analysis of spare wheel cover by using finite element analysis (FEA) computer program showed that the highest safety factor (SF) was exhibited by NKFE composites at 0.42  $V_f$ , which also possessed the highest specific strength and modulus.

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Overview**

For thousands of years, humans have taken objects from nature to create a better world for themselves. From huts of mud and straw, to towers of rock and steel, the rise of modern civilization has been paced by our development of new materials. In line with the huge strides made by scientific discovery and the drive to push the limits of material properties, composite materials have been the focus of many studies and have seen much advancement in recent years. Scientists have carefully designed composites with far superior properties compared to conventional materials in order to fulfil specific requirements for various applications. Basically, composites are defined as materials that consist of two or more chemically and physically different phases (typically the reinforcing phase and the matrix phase) separated by a distinct interface (Jose and Joseph, 2012). The different systems are combined to achieve a system with improved structural or functional properties.

Polymer composites have become an integral part of today's material due to its advantages such as low weight, corrosion resistance and faster assembly. From construction to the aerospace industry, polymer composites have proven its significance due to the many advantages it offers (Shaw et al., 2010). Polymeric materials reinforced with synthetic fibres such as glass and carbon provide the advantage of higher stiffness and strength to weight ratio as compared to conventional construction materials such as wood, steel and concrete. Despite the advantages, the widespread usage of synthetic fibre as reinforcement in polymeric materials has its

disadvantages such as high cost, adverse environmental impacts and its abrasive nature.

Therefore, over the past few decades, there has been a rapid growth in the utilisation of natural fibres as green reinforcement or filler in composites (Alizadeh et al., 2016; Pickering et al., 2015; Idicula et al., 2009). This is driven by the advantages they offer such as high specific strength and moduli, and a non-abrasive nature during processing (Lee et al., 2010; Ku et al., 2011; Mantia et al., 2011; Hamma et al., 2014). Natural fibres have been proven to be a greener, cheaper and viable replacement for conventional glass fibres (Assarar et al., 2016). In addition, the usage of high loading of natural fibres would significantly lower the usage of petroleum-based plastic. Since the price of petroleum-based plastics has risen sharply over the past decade, adding natural fibre to plastics provides an avenue for cost reduction to the plastic industry as well as increased value for the agro-based component. All these advantages may not be possible with conventional fibres.

In light of the current interest and advancements in natural fibre composites, its commercialization in the automotive industry has been progressive and positive. The shift to parts of higher suitability in the automotive industry was not only an initiative towards cost efficiency and a greener environment but was also required for the fulfilment of European regulations. In 2000, The European Commission issued the European Guideline 2000/53/EG which required that 85 % of the weight of a vehicle to be recyclable (Koronis et al., 2013). Car manufacturers like Mercedes-Benz, Audi, Toyota, Ford, Mitsubshi and BMW have all utilised natural fibre composites in automotive interior parts such as door trim panels, and floor mats (Suddell and Evans, 2005; Mohanty et al., 2005; Stewart, 2010). Apart from that, natural fibre composites are also used in exterior components of cars. Flax/polyester composites have been used

to make the engine and transmission enclosures for sound insulation in Mercedes-Benz's Travego while the spare tire well covers of the Mercedes-Benz A-class was made up of abaca/PP composites (Koronis et al., 2013).

Despite the availability of various types of natural fibre nowadays, kenaf fibre, KF, (*Hibiscus cannabinus*) is a particularly attractive option due to its fast growth over a wide range of climatic conditions (Cho et al., 2009) and its consequent low cost. Recently, the promotion of KF as the next commodity plant in Malaysia has become a national agenda. The Malaysian government has shown great commitment in supporting the KF industry which will provide a new source of economic growth for the country. In 2010, the National Kenaf and Tobacco Board received more than RM 30 million to develop KF industry in various states including Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang. The allocation includes more than RM 2 million for research and development of KF and its product (Utusan Malaysia, 2011).

In this research, nonwoven KF was incorporated into the epoxy matrix in order to produce a 'green' composite with the intention of obtaining materials which potentially possess improved properties that are suitable for interior or exterior automotive parts. Thus, this dissertation focuses on the effects of nonwoven KF loading on the physical and mechanical properties of the nonwoven kenaf fibre/epoxy (NKFE) composites produced by resin transfer moulding (RTM). Furthermore, the prediction of tensile properties through micromechanical models and the determination of composites efficiency factors through micromechanics analysis are also presented.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

There are several issues that are highlighted in this research. First of all, this study aimed to promote the shifting of synthetic fibre to natural fibre, particularly kenaf fibre as reinforcement in composites. To achieve this, nonwoven kenaf fibre was used as reinforcement in composite as opposed to synthetic fibres which have environmental disadvantages. Kenaf fibre offers both economic and ecological advantages, hence making it a good candidates for reinforcement in composites (Alexopoulou et al., 2013). Also, nonwoven kenaf fibre possesses advantages such as lightweight, environment-friendly and attractive cost/performance ratio making its composites suitable for interior automotive applications (Vasile and van Langenhove, 2004; Thilagavathi et al., 2010; Sayeed et al., 2013; Diener and Siehler, 1999).

Secondly, there have been limited studies on the mechanical properties of resin transfer moulded nonwoven kenaf fibre/epoxy composites. Mechanical properties are one of the most essential and crucial properties as nearly all fabrication processes and most service conditions are exposed to some type of mechanical loading. A research by Fiore et al. (2014), only reported the effect of alkaline treatment on the tensile properties of epoxy composites reinforced with randomly oriented kenaf mats. The effect of fibre loading on the mechanical properties of the composites was not covered. It is worthwhile to note that the nonwoven KF used in the study by Fiore et al. (2014) was produced by simple fibre dispersion followed by wetting and hot pressing.

Thirdly, there has been limited work on the prediction of tensile properties of nonwoven natural fibre composites. Prediction of mechanical properties by using micromechanical models is vital in order to avoid costly and time-consuming experiments. However, most models were created to predict the tensile properties of

synthetic fibres such as glass fibre and carbon fibre (Harper et al., 2005; Thomason et al., 1996). Therefore, there is a need to identify a good micromechanical model to represent the behaviour of NKFE composites. It is also worthy to note that the intrinsic properties of fibres are key factors in producing an accurate prediction of the composite's properties.

Many studies have failed to predict the stiffness of randomly-oriented natural fibre composites accurately due to assumption of fibre isotropy (Epaarachchi et al., 2009; Islam and Begum, 2011; Facca et al., 2006). Most research did not take into account the fibre transverse modulus in their prediction leading to inaccurate prediction. Furthermore, the elastic anisotropy of most natural fibres has been left undetermined. The transverse fibre modulus ( $E_{f2}$ ) and the longitudinal Young's modulus ( $E_{f1}$ ) need to be quantified in order to produce better predictions using micromechanical models. While it is easy to measure the  $E_{f1}$  directly, characterising the  $E_{f2}$  has proven to be challenging. Consequently, there is a great necessity to find a simple and proper method to quantify the elastic anisotropy of natural fibre accurately.

Resin transfer moulding (RTM) is a suitable processing method for reinforcing thermosets with nonwoven natural fibres. However, research directed on the fabrication of nonwoven KF composites by using the RTM is still lacking. RTM processing method retains the shape of the needle-punched nonwoven natural fibres, as well as produces a composite with better mechanical properties compared to other processing methods such as compression moulding and the hand lay-up method (Idicula et al., 2009; Davallo et al., 2010; Sreekumar et al., 2009).

Lastly, there is a need to better understand and quantify the micromechanical parameters which control the structure-properties relationship of NKFE composites.