MSc Student Staff Forum

Wednesday 12th November 2018

CM F.17, 9.15

Attending: Katarina Alexander, MSc AI (2 yr)
Makenzy Abass Gumah, MSc Net. Sec.
Kate MacAulay, MSc Data Science (2 yr)
Yifan Yu, MSc AI
Adrien Sanchez, MSc AI+SMI
Mael Abgrall, MSc AI
Kate-Lynne Thomson, MSc Data Science (2 yr)
Karan Singh, MSc AI (2 yr)
Abubaker Mohammed, MSc HRI
Stamatios Tiniakos, MSc Data Science

Manuel Maarek, MSc director IT(SS), Net Sec., Soft. Eng.
Arash Eshgi, Ass. Prof. teaching F29AI
Katrin Lohan, MSc director HRI
Ron Petrick, MSc director AI, AI+SMI
Ioannis Kostas, Ass. Prof.
Hamish Taylor, MSc director BIM, Computing, IT (Bus), chair

Apologies: Alasdair Gray, MSc Director CSM, Data Science
Lilia Georgieva, MSc project coordinator

HT explained that the meeting was called in response to requests for a meeting from MSc student reps in relation to coursework on F29AI AI and Intelligent Agents. However, it was due anyway to be called in November as its remit is to provide a regular forum for Computer Science MSc students to express their concerns to the teaching staff.

KA opened the discussion by saying she hadn't yet been able to do one of the courseworks on F29AI. She felt she hadn't yet got the Java programming skills needed to attempt it even though it was mandatory.

KS supported KA's point and said that although he was keen to do it, he was in the same position as KA of struggling to know how.

AE, who set the coursework, said he'd been trying to address the issue. The current coursework deadline was 2 weeks away. However, he hadn't been aware when he set it that his class would have such a range of programming abilities. He said he was open to setting another coursework, but felt it was somewhat late to intervene.

KS suggested that it would have been better to have done F29AI in semester 2 after doing F21SF Software Engineering Foundations in semester 1.

MM said that the issue of 2 year MSc students doing F29AI while still learning how to program on F21SF, which MM taught, alongside 3rd year Computer Science undergraduates who were expert in Java programming was an issue that needed a proper fix. He said there was a case for

reshaping the 2 year MScs to address the issue.

AE offered to put on a special lab to help out students who were struggling on his F29AI coursework or to extend the coursework deadline.

KL said she was worried about extending coursework deadlines as this had an impact on student loads in relation to other coursework deadlines later on in the semester and an impact on students having sufficient opportunity to revise before the exam period in weeks 13 and 14.

AE explained that the 2nd F29AI coursework was an exercise in Java of creating an unbeatable tictactoe agent. He felt it could be done by a good Java programmer in about 10 lines of code. However, he acknowledged that it might be challenging for novice programmers to do. He offered to set a substitute coursework that could be answered conceptually by specifying a tictactoe playing algorithm rather than by writing a Java game playing program that embodied it.

KT supported KA and KS's arguments by saying that this coursework required a huge leap for 2 year MSc students who hadn't much or any prior programming experience.

KS agreed with her.

YY said that this coursework was also challenging for students like her on the 1 year MSc AI who hadn't done Java programming before.

MAG broadened the discussion by observing that most of his fellow MSc Network Security students doing F21SC Industrial Programming, which teaches programming in C# and Python, were really struggling. Most of them did not have much background in coding and were expected on the course to engage heavily with it.

HT pointed out that there were Code Clinics that ran for an hour on Mondays and Thursdays at 13.15 in EM 2.50. They were staffed by experienced 4th year Computer Science students and could be used by MSc students seeking help with programming in addition to labs for F29AI and F21SC.

KT said she couldn't make a Code Clinic on the early afternoon of a Wednesday.

YY suggested that in future all prospective MSc AI (and Data Science) students, both 1 and 2 year, be asked to do online courses in Java such as those offered by Udemy before arriving if they lacked Java skills.

KA observed that more 1-1 tutorials on coding would definitely help.

ST changed the topic of discussion and made some observations on the 1 year MSc Data Science which he was studying part-time. He suggested that the course notes offered on F21SA Statistical Analysis and Modelling were too busy and too condensed. The issues addressed needed to be explained at greater length and in a more step by step fashion.

ST also suggested that 4 out 5 Data Science students were really struggling with F21DV Data Visualisation and Analytics. Students really needed better preparation in programming in

JavaScript before being expected to use the D3 library to create data visualisations inside web browsers.

ST also asked about the MSc project. When would students get to choose their MSc projects? He had particular concerns as he was on a Data Lab scholarship and needed to do a project with a company as part of that. He had been told that would happen in January to March but was worried it was rather late.

HT explained that MSc project signup and allocation would happen in mid December. It was organised through a sophisticated bespoke web based project system. He explained the details and distinguished between academic proposed projects, student proposed projects and company proposed (or hosted) projects. All were handled within the system. A few students might linger on into early January in terms of getting signed up with companies but it was expected that all MSc students doing F21RP would have a project recorded on the system and an academic supervisor by mid January.

ST said he looked forward to seeing what this MSc project system would offer.

MAG observed in general that he struggled to relate lectures to coursework. He would like all coursework to give specific guidance as to which lectures related to which bits of coursework.

Both KT and KA felt that in a course like F29AI having 30% of the overall course mark devoted to assessed coursework wasn't appropriate to the effort and time expected for it.

KA felt that on the 2 year MScs there was a need for more tutorials and small group work.

MAG suggested that courses to do with programming should come early in the day. 3 out of 4 timetabled slots for F21SF Software Engineering Foundations were at 14.15 or later and 2 out of 3 F21SC Industrial Programming slots were at 16.15 or later. Algorithmic thinking wasn't best done late in the day.

RP observed that in semester 1 there were heavy timetabling pressures to fit everything in. That meant there was no leeway for scheduling programming classes during particular periods of the day. Part of the problem was due to the sizes of classes and finding suitable classrooms in which all the students could fit. 158 students were now taking F29AI up from 125 last year. For the first time he and AE had been forced to split the class and run 2 labs for half the class each. He also observed that very early classes like those at 9.15 weren't congenial either.

HT observed that with such huge class sizes it might make more sense to split F29AI into separate undergraduate and postgraduate introductory AI courses rather than have recourse to double delivery for 2 halves of the class. That would allow each to be better adapted to the prior knowledge that could be expected of each.

RP said that the 3rd year undergraduates on F29AI had been asking for more programming whereas some MScs on it were finding the existing programming too challenging.

AE said part of the issue of supporting programming is getting suitable assistants to help out in labs. Currently he is responsible for arranging such assistance but it is a real struggle to get

suitable people to do it.

KT wondered whether having there was too much coursework on F29AI relative to the 30% percentage of overall marks accorded it. That proportion didn't reflect the relative time and effort that was needed to do it. The existing coursework should really be worth rather more.

HT said that there were difficulties with having assessed coursework count for most of the marks of a course. Whatever the faults of exams, at least one could have a reasonable degree of assurance with exam scripts as to who had actually written them. With coursework this wasn't so. Also the effort required to set, conduct, mark and moderate exams didn't justify only having them count for less than half of the overall course mark.

HT asked the MSc student reps whether they had any other concerns about the admissions and recruitment processes or about courses or projects.

KA suggested that having a group meeting with their MSc programme director at the start of the academic year and having each student on an MSc introduce themselves to each other would have been helpful.

HT thanked the students for attending and asked when the students present would next like to meet.

MAG and KA suggested that half way through next semester would be a suitable time.

The meeting was adjourned *sine die*.

Hamish Taylor