ILW Hack 2013 Report

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The Smart Data Hack (ILW Hack) took place during the whole of Innovative Learning Week (18th-22nd March), and involved teams of up to five students using data supplied for the Hack to build new applications. About 90 students registered initially; by the end of the week, 72 students were still involved, spread across 20 different teams. As expected, participation was primarily from second and first years.

Although students were able to use any data set they could get access to, three data providers played a special role:
- Skyscanner provided a dump of historical data, and also provided API keys for live datafeeds.
- City of Edinburgh Council provided 33 data sets under an open license for the first time, and also provided API keys for live datafeeds.
- The ALISS project (access to local information for people with long term health needs) provided API keys for their data.

Given the low level of engagement in ILW 2012 by Informatics students, we focussed much of our initial efforts on marketing the event, with strong and active support from CompSoc. Food and prizes were used as key incentives. In addition, we invested effort into developing a website that would be attractive to both students and sponsoring organisations, and allowed students to register for the event. We provided a CKAN data portal to help students access the data. Both the website and the data catalogue were hosted on a self-managed server. We also produced leaflets and advertised the event via email, Facebook and Twitter.

Two special lunches were funded by Open Innovation/Design Informatics and Greener Leith, while the other three lunches were provided by the ITO for all Informatics ILW participants. A large quantity of snacks (biscuits, fruit) was made available during each day.

Prizes were offered for submissions in five categories (Travel, Health & Wellbeing, Communities, Visualisation/UI, and Data Mashup) and were sponsored at a generous level: Skyscanner provided 5 x £100 Amazon vouchers for three prizes, Open Innovation and ALISS + ITO provided 5 x Kindle Fires for two prizes, and CompSoc provided 5 x Nexus 7s for a sixth prize. Judging was carried out by Gareth Williams (Skyscanner CEO), Keith Edwards and David Richardson (Informatics Ventures), Aaron Quigley (St Andrews/SICSA), Andy Hyde (ALISS), Freda O’Byrne (community activist) and Sally Kerr (City of Edinburgh Council).

Another incentive were the four workshops that were offered on the afternoon of the first day (geolocated data; D3.js; version control; HTML5) and the availability of mentors each day. (A total of 10 mentors were kind enough to offer their expertise and time.)
The quality of the projects was extremely impressive, and reflected very well on the calibre of Informatics students. Alan Roberson of Skyscanner commented:

*From looking at the lightning talks on Wednesday, myself and the other attendees from Skyscanner were pretty astounded at what some of the teams had produced in such a short period of time...*

Student response was generally very positive. One first year participant commented:

*This week was easily the most useful and fun week I’ve had since I started uni. This is what normal uni time should be like, learning new practical skills and putting them to good use to create something awesome.*

We know of three teams who are actively taking steps to continue working on their projects, two of them involving Council data and one of them using UoE data (MyEd 2.0).

There are numerous benefits to this kind of activity:

1. Our students learn new skills by working on real world problems. In particular, they acquire practise in coding in teams; they learn to use new libraries and techniques; they get to use versioning and repositories; and they gain experience in working with outside organisations.

2. The data owners benefit from having fresh eyes look at their data, they can encourage students to pilot possible applications, and they can start developing relationships that may progress to internships and employment.

3. A positive image of Informatics is projected to outside organisations and to the rest of the University. Professional photographs of the event were taken by Communications & Marketing as well as by the ITO, and Communications & Marketing also captured video of the final afternoon.