

Informatics Student Course Feedback 2017/18

<http://www.inf.ed.ac.uk/teaching/surveys/2017-18>

This report contains feedback from students about a course taught in the School of Informatics during the 2017/18 academic year, in response to the following questions:

- What would you say to students interested in taking this course?
- What did you find most valuable about the course?
- What improvements, if any, would you make to the course?
- Please add any other comments you have about workshops and tutors

Each course organiser receives this report as well as statistics on multiple-choice responses. All these reports, together with student feedback about individual members of teaching staff, are collected and sent to the Director of Learning and Teaching.

Please note that these are personal responses from individual students: some courses only have a few responses and a small sample can be unrepresentative.

Stereotyping and bias, especially unconscious bias, is a serious concern in any survey gathering personal responses. All students received the rubric below before completing the surveys, and you can read a brief introduction to issues of unconscious bias on the university web pages at <http://edin.ac/2iypZBv>

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Rubric given to all students taking the end-of-course feedback survey

We value your opinions on the courses you take here at the University, as they allow us to shape future delivery and development. We welcome constructive comments about your courses, whether positive or negative, and ask you to give details about any issues in order to help the course organiser to understand and address them.

We encourage you to be aware of the potential for bias in the completion of these questionnaires, so we have developed resources which may be helpful to you:

- Equality, Diversity and Unconscious Bias (<http://edin.ac/2iypZBv>)

You also have a responsibility to provide feedback in a manner which does not breach the University's Dignity and Respect Policy:

- University of Edinburgh Dignity and Respect Policy (<http://edin.ac/1Cq0VZY>)

The results of the questionnaires will never be analysed in a way that seeks to identify individual students from their responses. However, should you wish to remain anonymous, please do not identify yourself in your answers to the survey questionnaire implicitly or explicitly.

Comments Report

What advice would you give to a student taking this course in future?

- Also take MT, and get very familiar with neural networks.
- Be aware that this is heavily computational/ML based. Keep up with recommended readings if you can.
- Do ANLP before this course will help you a lot.
- Don't take it, really. There are courses from Stanford that are 100 times more clear even only based on slides. At least the people there know this subject is hard and treat it with the seriousness required, rather than making it seem easy when it's absolutely not.
- It is a really interesting course and I thoroughly enjoyed the content. I did not find the teaching staff very good - they were 2 weeks late releasing our assignment, they told us that a response on piazza would take a maximum of 24 hours (from Monday to Friday) and they did not follow this through. If you asked a question on piazza that they did not agree with it was deleted. The weight of our assignment was changed after the results had been released so make sure you have this confirmed before you start. It is not very clear what content is being covered in the exam - we were told "everything in the lectures" which was vague. Be prepared for independent learning.
- Read the assigned papers in advance of class whenever you can.
- Some content overlap with MT, both focus on neural nets.
- Stanford has uploaded lectures that cover a lot of this material on YouTube. These are great for additional help.
- Start the coursework early. Do the readings and don't be scared by the warnings at the first lecture. It's totally doable, even for students who have less programming experience.
- Take this course if you were really enthusiastic and passionate about ANLP or FNLP, but it is basically the same course with a few new elements but at a much quicker rate.

Comments Report

What did you find most valuable about the course?

- The coursework. I learned a lot, even though the lecturers were not really involved in that and actually made a big mess of it in the beginning, and some of what we had to do was never really covered in the course.
 - The lecturer is a good speaker.
 - The office hours, which were held consistently even on the snow days. I made use of them once and in general was glad to know I could always make use of them.
- Doing the assignment.
- Engaging lecturer, presentation of state-of-the-art research
- I'm not sure, we've barely had any lectures yet.
- Lectures, when we had them, were clear and informative. Frequent office hours by the lecturer.
- Some pointers to state-of-art research and ad-hoc problems
- The assignment helped me to see practical applications
- The content was really interesting and relevant.
- The coursework, once clarified, helped me to understand back-propagation in RNNs better. Adam offered consistent office hours and was helpful in those sessions.
- The feedback on the assignment was particularly useful: the marker identified and pointed out our misconceptions, and asked questions to encourage us to think more deeply. The lectures were always interesting. I appreciated having "feed-forward" sessions before the assignment, although it was a pity that it led to a rather long gap between normal "content" lectures because of the festival of creative learning.
- The lectures were interesting, the lecturer was really good. The coursework helped understand the material and I enjoyed doing it. I also appreciated the online/in person helping sessions.
- This course is good because it introduces you to some very recent models and the subject is very up-to-date with new approaches. The teacher seems very passionate about his work and is very knowledgeable, too bad he doesn't realise we're not.
- Absolutely nothing.

Comments Report

What improvements, if any, would you make to the course?

- Please try to have someone actually run the provided code for a coursework. This way, it would have become obvious that there were really annoying errors, such as indentation errors.
- Feedforward sessions for assignments are unnecessary, and could be left out. We have piazza and the office hours for that. I understand the strike; but I am really upset that 3 other lecture slots were taken up - one just cancelled for no reason; 2 for assignment Q&A (1 of which lasted only 15 minutes, and the lecturer had no alternative prepared)
- I still do not really know what NLU even is. We had 6 lectures on more or less RNNs, which I'm glad I understand now. Two additional lectures seemed to scratch the surface of NLU, although I'd be disappointed if parsing and semantic role labelling was all there was to it. Is NLU just NLP + LSTM? An overview over the tasks typically counted under the field "NLU" in the beginning of the course would have been helpful.
- Often, the lecture is interesting and entertaining, but the lecturer glosses quickly over important (technical or mathematical) details. The parts that he spends most time on are the parts I actually understand, or know from ANLP already. Even if the math seems trivial to some computer scientists, that is exactly what I came here to learn about.
- I think labs should definitely be introduced, especially before the assignment is released. A clear breakdown of the content that should be covered for the exam would be really useful instead we were vaguely told it would cover the content covered in lectures. We were told that our assignment would be worth 30% at the beginning of the semester in a lecture and this is what was on the course website. After the results of the assignment were released this was changed to 25%. Whether or not it was originally supposed to be weighted at 25%, we were misled and our results were reduced in value which is extremely unfair. Had we been explicitly told before doing the assignment that it would be worth less than we were originally told we may have distributed our time differently and paid more attention to other assignments that were worth more.
- I would have lab sessions, once a week at a minimum, to prepare students for the coursework that was all practical based. With no preparation on what to do it made the coursework very difficult. Although there are course requirements, the course assumed every was a top student and could take on the tasks - if you were able to take the class, but still needed guidance as you were new to programming - you were doomed.
- I would have liked to implement an LSTM, perhaps in the assignment or in practical sessions. Remove bugs from assignment code and instructions, sometimes the answers on Piazza regarding such typos were very confusing. It would have been helpful if we had been informed via e-mail about the FINAL updated version of the assignment without any bugs. Right before we submitted, we still found posts on Piazza saying something about small errors in the code that we were not aware of and that were to my knowledge not corrected.
- I would have preferred to have had the lectures less spread out throughout the semester because it was hard to follow along with such large gaps of time between each lecture.
- I would prefer having two assignments for 50% and final exam for another 50%.
- It would have been nice to have quizzes, as promised.
- Not enough content covered in the course materials. Too much overlap with ANLP, especially the dependency parsing and semantic roles sections. More referenced papers and problems could have been covered, such as machine comprehension
- The instructor should be more familiar with the coursework before handing it out, even if he/she did not write it. Adam was often stumped by questions regarding this year's assignment, and students needed a lot of clarification on a few of the sections. The coursework should also be stress tested so that students do not waste time debugging code only to realize later that the problems were in the files provided by the instructor. Since there are no labs or tutorials, it would have been good to have the quizzes that were promised in the syllabus. This material is challenging, and it's hard to know how well you've understood concepts without practical exercises.
- The organisation for the assignment could be improved. The code we were given had multiple mistakes and it was frustrating to update the code after the multiple edits. In the end, it has not been penalizing because people reached that particular section earlier than what was planned but it's still something that could have been avoided.
- There was a lot of overlap of material between this course and MT. Maybe combine these courses or focus on different topics in future?
- This class did suffer a lot from the strike unfortunately.
- This course is a mix of already known- super new and very hard stuff that is very confusing. After going through all the lectures with recordings and reading some papers the course seems so easy, but the exam is so hard. The lecturer tries to be funny and puts memes on slides, but after a whole semester he didn't tell us for example that there is a crucial difference between recursive and recurrent neural networks. The course materials are at best said poor, especially with no tutorials, I need to study from a whole lot of other courses I find online. I understand everything discussed in class, mainly because he discusses easy things only, and when you revise you realize you don't really know and understand anything.
- Tutorials or practice exercises or something would be nice
- We only take 11 lectures in this semester. It should be at least 15 lectures according to Adam's words.
- We skipped several lectures in the first half of the semester with no explanation, which makes the course feel even more disrupted and shortened than it would have been just be the strikes. The coursework had several bugs in it and the report several typos which were resolved, but made getting ahead in the coursework impossible. Also, the coursework was delayed being released which meant it then coincided with the asr and mt deadlines. There was no need for the two feedforward sessions for the coursework, I would have preferred to have actual lecture content. Many of the lectures felt like duplications of the MT course.

Comments Report

Please add any other comments you have about workshops and tutors

- No tutorials, workshops or labs for this course.