

Proposal for a New Seminar Series

Alan Bundy

January 15, 2009

Now that the Computational Thinking seminar series has run its course¹, I would like to propose a new seminar series, entitled “The Hamming Seminars”. The reason that this proposal is coming to iRAC is that, in order to fund the reception after the seminar, the Computational Thinking series was officially a Programme of the School. For the same reason, I would like the Hamming Seminars to be a Programme. iRAC is the School body that approves new Programmes.

The series is inspired by a famous talk² entitled “You and Your Research” by Richard Hamming at a Bell Communications Research Colloquium Seminar in March 1986 [Hamming, 1986]. Hence the series title. Of the many invaluable observations in his talk about how to do really significant research, one stands out. He emphasises the importance of asking:

What are the important problems of your field?

That is to be the theme of the Hamming Seminars.

In each seminar, we will invite one of the research leaders in our School to answer this question. Here are some of the sub-questions.

- Why are these problems important? For instance, what will they enable us to do that we can't do already.
- Why are these problems timely, i.e., why haven't they already been solved and what has happened recently to lead you to believe they can now be successfully addressed?
- Over what kind of time-frames and in what forms do you expect solutions to emerge?
- What approaches to these problems do you consider most promising and what kind of knowledge and skills do these approaches require?
- How does this relate to your own current research?

The Hamming Seminars will be open to all staff and students of the School, plus anyone else interested. The format will be similar to the Computational Thinking seminar series: once a month; probably 16.00 Wednesday, avoiding Distinguished Lectures and similar School events; one hour talk followed by 15 mins questions followed by small reception.

Why is this seminar series important? We want everyone in the School to do really significant research. That entails attacking important problems. Identifying problems that are both important, but also timely and feasible, requires a lot of experience. We should draw on all the experience in the School and share it. It is especially useful for new researchers to hear what experienced researchers have to say — even if they disagree with the advice. Usually, these questions are left implicit in talks and papers. It is good to bring them out into the open. The speakers may also benefit from being encouraged to think about these issues.

There are also other benefits.

- Now we are together in the Forum it is timely to understand where other researchers are coming from.

¹We might have an occasional one, if something interesting crops up.

²<http://www.inf.ed.ac.uk/teaching/courses/irm/YouAndYourResearch.pdf>

- ‘Significance’ was one of the three criteria by which RAE 2008 outputs were assessed. It will surely figure in future REF assessments. We want to maximise our performance under this measure.
- Students considering whether to undertake a postgraduate degree might be inspired by one of these talks.

I invite you to approve this new seminar series and to grant it a similar reception budget to the Computational Thinking seminar series.

References

- [Hamming, 1986] Hamming, Richard. (March 1986). You and your research. Technical report, Bell Communications Research, Transcription of a Colloquium Seminar by J. F. Kaiser.