Distributing opportunity for our young scientists in computer science or artificial intelligence

SEP 29, Amsterdam, the Netherlands -- The VU Dept. of Informatics hosted the First Research Meetup of the BSc Honours Programme in computer science and artificial intelligence (see Figure 1). Attendees included talented young scientists leading their research projects, leadership and staff members of the department, and students interested in developing their talents. Organized by Selma Zaghow, Charlotte Gerritsen, and Alexandru Iosup, the 2 ½-hour event enabled over 30 participants to exchange views on projects, science, and further collaboration.

The First Research Meetup assembled over thirty people using a complementary online and offline format. Four students took center-stage, presenting their work in short pitches that accompany longer videos prepared and shared in advance. They received many questions from the audience, practicing the critical scientific skill of engaging with peers and other experts in a lively format. They also got to share their experience with prospective HP students. Topics covered understanding datacenter operation, developing robots linked genetically, massivizing Minecraft-like games (Figure 2), making critical IT infrastructure more sustainable (Figure 3), and others.

A scientific meeting would not be complete without broader, more mature work presented to inspire and motivate. During the Meetup, several professors introduced in short pitches their research, linking them to HP projects. They complemented the pitches with more extensive slide-decks, with overviews of entire research lines, shared in Canvas since before the event. This led to a lively atmosphere, with many questions and much interaction. After the event, the organizers shared minutes of the event, summarizing the questions and answers.

The development of young talent is at the core of any responsible community, but it is particularly challenging in professional fields such as computer science and artificial intelligence. At the VU, the Department of Informatics is pioneering an approach where each student becomes the leader of a research project. A project typically takes around 18 ECs (about 500 hours), giving enough breathing and development time, and enabling projects of significant scope and ambition. By engaging students in professional settings so early, we hope they will develop quickly and transition as young talent into professional life. This kind of approach appears in various top-performing organizations, among which the football superclub Ajax Amsterdam, which has become one of the leading providers of talent in professional leagues.

Unlike football, science has no single template or metric for a successful career. This is why the BSc Honours Programme aims to distribute opportunity across all (good) students, no matter their background. This is incredibly valuable to society because students of all backgrounds can...
pursue this program, accumulating demonstrable experience and expertise. Concretely, to become eligible for this program, students must only have completed all their coursework in time, with a minimal grade-point average of 7.5; these are low requirements, making eligible a large fraction of all students.

In conclusion: juniors, experienced scientists, and wannabes met on September 29 in Amsterdam for the First Research Meetup of the VU Dept. of Informatics’s BSc Honours Programme. New and inspiring ideas in computer science and artificial intelligence zoomed in. Inspired by this success, the organizers are planning a Second Research Meetup.

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Figure 1. The Honours Programme, in a nutshell.

https://canvas.vu.nl/courses/47240
Figure 2. VU BSc student Tiberiu Iancu (fourth from the left, with the head-mounted microphone) introduces his OpenCraft project on massivizing online games.

Figure 3. VU BSc student Simone Colombo (third from the left) introduces his project to understand and improve the sustainability of critical IT infrastructure for machine learning.