

Launch of UKZN/CSIR-Meraka Centre for Artificial Intelligence Research

One of the largest Artificial Intelligence research centres on the continent

The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and the CSIR-Meraka Institute, based in Pretoria, have joined hands to create one of the largest Artificial Intelligence research centres on the continent: the UKZN/CSIR-Meraka Centre for Artificial Intelligence Research (CAIR). The official launch of the Centre will take place on UKZN's Westville campus in the Science & Technology Education Centre (STEC) on November 9 at 12h30.

The Centre was initiated by CAIR Director and Head of the Knowledge Representation and Reasoning Group at CSIR-Meraka, Professor Thomas Meyer, and CAIR Deputy Director and Senior Lecturer in UKZN's School of Computer Science, Dr Deshendra Moodley. CAIR already has as members, MSc and PhD students, postdoctoral fellows, and researchers, located both at UKZN in Durban and at CSIR-Meraka in Pretoria. Additional MSc, PhD and postdoctoral scholarships will be awarded soon.

Both the CSIR-Meraka Institute and UKZN's School of Computer Science bring strengths to the collaboration. As the largest group in the country dedicated to information and communication technology (ICT), the CSIR-Meraka Institute fosters industrial and scientific development by focusing on multi-disciplinary research and technological innovation. Computer Science at UKZN comes to the party with a wide range of expertise in Artificial Intelligence and other related areas. It is actively involved in conducting research, teaching and community development in the broad field of Computer Science.

CAIR's primary objective is to promote and sustain excellent research in both the theoretical and applied aspects of Artificial Intelligence. Strongly aligned with this aim is the need for capacity building in the field. This will be achieved through student supervision, the presentation of advanced courses in the area, and cooperation and exchange with leading local and international universities. To achieve these goals, CAIR members have already started to consult and collaborate with existing departments at UKZN, existing research groups at the CSIR, and several other local and international tertiary institutions and science councils.

One of CAIR's first events, the Masters Artificial Intelligence Spring School, was held on UKZN's Westville campus at the end of September. The event enabled participants to attend advanced Artificial Intelligence courses presented by local and international experts, and to present ongoing and completed research.

CAIR will be home to established research groups such as the Knowledge Representation and Reasoning group and the Health Enterprise Architecture Laboratory, as well as a number of emerging research areas, ranging from Computer Vision to Optimisation and Modelling. 'One of the most exciting aspects of CAIR is the potential for combining different Artificial Intelligence related techniques to achieve greater impact in a variety of application areas' said Meyer. 'For example, automatic scene interpretation and object recognition from video footage can be used to generate formal representations of knowledge, which in turn can lead to better decision making processes based on automated reasoning in application areas such as environmental disaster management and emergency response. Similarly, the structured representation of patient clinical records will enable computers to move beyond the querying abilities of today's database systems, leading to intelligent and integrated health care information systems.'

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