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Bridging the gap between academia and practical science – a unique workshop hosted by UCT

The University of Cape Town's Department of Statistical Sciences recently held the "UCT Data Science Workshop" to facilitate conversation and foster collaboration between academia, students and the data science industry.

In her opening speech, Associate Professor Francesca Little reiterated that the Department of Statistical Sciences seeks to maintain a balance between the development of theory and applications of that theory into practice. The department recognises the need to train professionals in the statistical sciences, and at the same time to provide quantitative and decision-making skills to students in other disciplines. The department offers both undergraduate and postgraduate programs in Data Science and Analytics, in collaboration with other departments at UCT.

Research done within the department covers mathematical and applied statistics, operations research, biostatistics (including medical statistics, statistical ecology and statistical genetics), and financial statistics (including econometrics, portfolio management and general business statistics).

Over 90 participants were treated to presentations by speakers from the data science industry – including representatives from Isazi Consulting, Deep Data, IBM Research Africa, Shoprite, ORSSA, Derivco, SAEON, Prescient, Eighty20, ABSA, and Aerobotics as well as speakers from UCT. During the workshop participants explored the synergies and opportunities between statistical sciences and the industry.

This workshop and interaction with businesses provided UCT with the unique opportunity to assess whether their postgraduate courses truly prepare students for a career in Data Science. After the workshop, students felt inspired that what they have learned in theory during their course can be translated into practice.

One of the key speakers of the day, Associate Professor Tim Gebbie, summed up the workshop: "It was really exciting, a privilege, to see the depth and quality of the kinds of data-science and machine-learning research and development taking place in the local industry. Some take-aways for me were that, first, this is predominately small agile Research and Development companies and specialised science teams, and second, these are transdisciplinary teams that couple deep domain knowledge with years of bespoke statistical

science, applied mathematics and engineering experience.”

“They are quietly just getting on with interesting and practical science and technology development away from the usual social media hubris. This was a real privilege to have experienced. It is also good to realise that there are a couple of universities who have stepped up to both defend and share the required interdisciplinary foundational science competencies.”

ENDS

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