Optimizing Routes in Unpredictable Environments

Route optimization is a critical problem with wide-ranging applications, including transportation, logistics, internet communication, and energy distribution. At its core, route optimization involves finding the most efficient path or *route* within a network, connecting a starting point to a destination based on specific objectives and constraints. In this context, a route is represented as a sequence of connected nodes (e.g., intersections or network nodes) and edges (e.g., roads or communication links) within a graph that models the network. The goal of the optimization process is to determine the "best" route, which may vary depending on the objectives, such as minimizing time, cost, distance, or energy consumption, or maximizing safety and user satisfaction. This optimization is vital across various sectors: (i) urban logistics, (ii) transportation networks, (iii) emergency services, (iv) telecommunication networks, and energy distribution. The increasing complexity of modern network systems, driven by the growth in data volume and diverse application demands, emphasises the need for scalable and adaptive routing solutions. Existing solutions to route optimization primarily focus on developing advanced algorithms and machine learning models [5, 7, 2, 1, 4, 15, 16, 9, 10]. Despite significant progress, several critical challenges remain unresolved, particularly in dynamic and large-scale networks where multiple objectives and real-time adaptability are required.

Algorithmic Perspective

State-of-the-art algorithmic approaches [5, 7, 2, 1, 12] often rely on preprocessing input networks to construct auxiliary data structures. These structures significantly reduce query response times, from several seconds to milliseconds or even microseconds. However, these methods encounter limitations when handling multiple objectives or constraints. Preprocessing a road network for each objective separately would lead to excessive space consumption and computational overhead. Dynamic environments further exacerbate these limitations. For instance, transportation networks frequently experience fluctuating travel times due to traffic conditions, whereas communication networks may encounter varying bandwidth capacities due to congestion. Existing dynamic routing solutions [17, 13, 8, 6, 3] support only a single objective or accommodate a very limited fraction of dynamic updates; otherwise, their performance degrades significantly. Efficiently updating auxiliary data structures in real-time while maintaining query accuracy remains an open challenge.

Machine Learning Perspective

Machine learning methods have recently emerged as promising tools for route optimization [4, 15, 16, 9, 10]. Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) [14, 11] are widely used to capture both local and global dependencies via a message-passing paradigm. These models encode critical network attributes, such as connectivity, traffic conditions, and edge weights, into node and edge embeddings, which are then utilized to compute optimal routes via search algorithms or reinforcement learning frameworks. However, several limitations persist: (i) *Capturing global path information:* Current GNNs struggle to efficiently encode global path representations due to the localized nature of message passing; (ii) *Scalability:* Encoding all possible paths explicitly in large graphs is computationally prohibitive, limiting scalability; (iii) *Path-level reasoning:* Current methods prioritize node and edge embeddings, often neglecting holistic path representations critical for reasoning about entire routes. (iv) *Adaptability:* Models lack robustness in dynamic environments, as they cannot update representations adaptively without retraining, which is time-intensive and impractical in real-world settings.

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In this project, we aim to develop robust deep learning models capable of predicting environmental changes by analyzing historical and real-time data. The existing algorithms excel at performing quick updates for analytics; however, they lack the intelligence to anticipate future events effectively. To address this limitation, we will integrate advanced deep learning techniques with algorithmic approaches to allow the real-time computation of optimal routes in dynamic and unpredictable networks.

A key aspect of this work involves investigating the limitations of GNNs in generating meaningful representations for all paths within a network. Our research will focus on identifying and addressing the challenges that hinder GNNs from accurately modelling complex dependencies between paths, including: (i) *Scalability:* Understanding how GNNs can be scaled to accommodate large networks, (ii) *Local and global patterns:* Enhancing the ability of GNNs to capture both localized structures and global dependencies within a network, (iii) *Dynamic adaptation:* Overcoming computational constraints that arise in dynamically changing networks, where conditions such as traffic congestion or bandwidth variations evolve in real time, and *Representational bottlenecks:* Investigating why current GNN architectures struggle to generalize effectively across diverse route optimization scenarios. By addressing these challenges, we aim to develop novel strategies or adaptations to enhance the applicability of GNNs for the route optimization problem, ultimately enabling them to produce high-quality, efficient, and diverse routing solutions.

Candidate Profile
Applicants should have an academic background in computer science, mathematics, physics, engineering, or a related field. Strong programming skills, along with experience in data analysis and mathematical modeling, are highly desirable. Knowledge of graph theory would be an advantage.

Contact: Dr Muhammad Yaqoob at m.yaqoob3@herts.ac.uk

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