**Results**

We find that course recommendations using topic models are promising. We used expert validation to evaluate the results of the recommendations: alumni and members of academic advising were asked to interact with the system and comment on the usefulness and coherence of the recommended courses. The use of self-selected key words targeted at the content of a student’s interests were most useful. Alumni were surprised when they were recommended courses from other faculties that they had not previously been aware of. The quality of recommendations decreased with the use of transcript data. This is because topics containing explanations on the format or structure of the course overwhelmed content recommendations. For instance, words such as *research*, *method*, *design*, and *skill* were identified as part of a student’s interest along with *philosophy*, *media*, *literature* and *film*. The recommendations then included most variations of courses such as *Research Project,* *Research Methods*, and *Writing a Research Proposal* offered at all the faculties in our data. As a consequence, courses such as *Narrative Media*, *Pop songs and poetry*, or *Shakespeare on Screen* which are recommended when only the second set of key words is selected were lost from the recommendations. Nevertheless, the approach of using a topic model as a basis for recommendations was useful because of the flexibility of the models. Given that the same word belongs to different topics, multiple interpretations of the word can be captured by our model. Moreover, the topics acted as a buffer between the search of the student and the courses, thereby identifying courses with similar thematic, even when the course description did not contain the key words a student selected.

The warning system proved to be more challenging. Whilst we managed to use topic expertise along with GPA at different levels of granularity to predict student grades with an error of around 0.8 points of a grade, the flexible and individual nature of the Liberal Arts and Science degree greatly impacted the quality of the preparatory course recommendations because all our samples were small. The average number of students per course (in the period 2007-2017) was a mere 57.8 students. The courses which had the greatest impact on the grades of students for a particular course were not always coherently connected to said course. For instance, our system identified the science course of *General Zoology* as a preparatory course for the advanced social science course *Contemporary Sociological Theory*. This suggests that our model is capturing random variation or individual differences rather than actual characteristics of the course structure. Nevertheless, the predicted grades of students provides academic advisors important information to keep in mind when discussing success strategies with particular advisees.

**Future work**

The difficulties suggested above indicate two path ways for future work. First, in the context of modeling student interest, there is a need to classify the topics into those describing methods/structure and those describing content. This would enable us to give topics different weights depending on the student’s priorities. In the same way, a method to calibrate redundancies in course recommendations (such as when the same course is offered at different faculties) needs to be addressed so the student can tailor it to suit their needs. Repetition in course recommendations is not always undesirable, since some redundant courses are offered at different points in time, thus giving students scheduling flexibility. However, a balance must be found scheduling flexibility and redundancy of recommendations.

Second, in the context of preparatory course identification, further research needs to be done in modeling the course space integrating information beyond students’ past performance in order to bypass the problems associated with our small sample.