

MSc AI Dissertation Project Proposal Form

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Project title:	Enabling Sample Efficient Design Space Exploration through Machine Learning Methods		
Project description – background, aims, objectives, research question(s), brief reflection on novelty/originality			

Engineering is propelled by effective design space exploration and optimisation. As is common, numerical tools are used to substitute expensive physical testing; for example, computational fluid dynamics can, by solving physical numerical equations, provide engineers with flow field information such as surface pressure fields and velocity profiles. Such simulations are computationally expensive and not optimised for fast, iterative design exploration, which can be partly attributed to the input geometry complexities (unstructured mesh files, point clouds, etc.) inhibiting simple parameterisation that would enable an interpretable representation of complex features and geometries. In the absence of such a concise description of how shapes are related, design space exploration and optimisation is constrained to a high-dimensional landscape, inheriting computational challenges and falling victim to the curse of dimensionality, which suppresses efficient design exploration. Complex shapes, such as those found in typical aerodynamic applications, can be composed of millions of elements described by vertices, edges, and faces, and therefore exploring all combinations is computationally infeasible. Having a low-dimensional representation of complex shapes that concisely represents the defining features and nuances enables optimisation methods such as grid search, Monte-Carlo methods, or gradient-based optimisation to be performed more efficiently. This research aims to identify, investigate, and compare different approaches to addressing this high-dimensional challenge.

Despite industry application mainly residing in the 3D space, the computational burden and data availability introduce unnecessary challenges that detract from the underlying concepts proposed in this research, and that for that reason, we will focus on 2D geometries and optimisation problems.

The objectives of this project will be to research and compare different AI models for encoding geometries into low-dimensional spaces and to assess how such representations facilitate design space exploration for optimising geometric quantities of interest, analogous to real optimisation problems in complex engineering design. The project will also analyse the structure and smoothness of the learned geometry representations and their suitability for use in different optimisation approaches such as gradient-based, genetic algorithms, and Bayesian optimisation. Finally, we aim to identify which approaches to geometry representation provide the most interpretable and controllable representation that can be harnessed to conduct targeted design modification and optimisation.

Generative models, such as auto-encoders, encoder-decoders, and generative adversarial networks, are finding use cases across engineering. Despite auto-encoders emerging in the 1980s, their applications across engineering are increasing to enable conventionally high-complexity and compute-resource-hungry processes to be approached in an intermediary low-dimensional search space. Additionally, design space exploration and optimisation are a critical enabler to design innovation, and doing so in a cost-efficient manner is sought in industry whereby conventional numerical simulations are intractably resource-hungry for such highly complex components and systems. In addition to investigating methods for compressing the high-dimensional complexity of geometries, we will deploy the learned representations to a simple 2D optimisation problem, area to perimeter ratio – which may be perceived as the 2D equivalent of surface area to volume ratio, which is often used as a parameter to control heat loss; however, this approach could be extended to other industry problems, such as optimising the lift to drag coefficient for an airfoil.

Methodology – rationale, data selection and collection, recruitment of participants, analytical process

The project will be conducted by firstly identifying a comprehensive dataset of 2D shapes that will be used to represent the geometry space, albeit simplified into the 2D domain to avoid computational limitations associated with data formats such as voxel grids, point clouds and mesh grids. Optionally, the UIUC 2D aerofoil dataset may be used, however, this dataset is smaller and spans a more similar library of geometries (i.e., all aerofoils). For 2D shapes, the representation of original data can be structured as pixels like in images – the sparse connectivity of such data makes the project appropriately tractable vs. computationally intensive structures such as point clouds, mesh and voxels.

All data will be stored locally and processed using Python. Specifically, for working with ML models the data will be stored as .h5 files for efficient storage and access. Any neural network models will be built using Metas' PyTorch architecture, and training using the CUDA implementation for efficient, parallelised model training.

A literature review will be conducted that will identify techniques for representation high dimensionality data into a low dimensional space, alongside design exploration and optimisation methods that can be used for engineering design. This review will aim to identify state-of-the-art techniques to latent space representation and identify opportunities to build on or leverage technologies for design space exploration.

Theoretical framework and intended tools/technologies

Generative models may include Auto-encoders, Variational Auto-encoders, Denoising Auto-encoders, Sparse Auto-encoders, Contractive Auto-encoders. Generative Adversarial Networks. Implicit Neural Representations.

Key literature identified for literature review (include references)

Park, J. J., Florence, P., Straub, J., Newcombe, R., & Lovegrove, S. (2019). DeepSDF: Learning continuous signed distance functions for shape representation. *Proceedings of the IEEE Computer Society Conference on Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition, 2019-June*.

<https://doi.org/10.1109/CVPR.2019.00025>

Zhu, Z., Wang, X., Bai, S., Yao, C., & Bai, X. (2016). Deep Learning Representation using Autoencoder for 3D Shape Retrieval. *Neurocomputing, 204*.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neucom.2015.08.127>

Li, P., Pei, Y., & Li, J. (2023). A comprehensive survey on design and application of autoencoder in deep learning. In *Applied Soft Computing* (Vol. 138). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asoc.2023.110176>

Sun, JM., Wu, T. & Gao, L. Recent advances in implicit representation-based 3D shape generation. *Vis. Intell.* 2, 9 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44267-024-00042->

Sharp, N., Attai, S., Crane, K., & Ovsjanikov, M. (2022). DiffusionNet: Discretization Agnostic Learning on Surfaces. *ACM Transactions on Graphics, 41*(3). <https://doi.org/10.1145/3507905>

Wu, Z., Song, S., Khosla, A., Yu, F., Zhang, L., Tang, X., & Xiao, J. (2015). 3D ShapeNets: A deep representation for volumetric shapes. *Proceedings of the IEEE Computer Society Conference on Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition, 07-12-June-2015, 1912–1920*.

<https://doi.org/10.1109/CVPR.2015.7298801>

Qi, C. R., Su, H., Mo, K., & Guibas, L. J. (2017). PointNet: Deep learning on point sets for 3D classification and segmentation. *Proceedings - 30th IEEE Conference on Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition, CVPR 2017, 2017-January, 77–85*. <https://doi.org/10.1109/CVPR.2017.16>

Tripp, A., Daxberger, E., & Hernández-Lobato, J. M. (2020). Sample-efficient optimization in the latent space of deep generative models via weighted retraining. *Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems, 2020-December*.

Zhen Wei, Edouard R. Dufour, Colin Pelletier, Pascal Fua and Michaël Bauerheim (2024). Diffairfoil: An efficient novel airfoil sampler based on latent space diffusion model for aerodynamic shape optimization. *AIAA AVIATION FORUM AND ASCEND 2024*, July 2024.

Zheng, L., Karapiperis, K., Kumar, S., & Kochmann, D. M. (2023). Unifying the design space and optimizing linear and nonlinear truss metamaterials by generative modeling. *Nature Communications, 14*(1). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-023-42068-x>

Industrial partner (if appropriate)

Rolls-Royce,

Mark Hobbs – Mark.Hobbs@Rolls-Royce.com | Technical Specialist Future Methods

Project management

Table: Project timeline and key outputs (expand table as needed)

Week	Activity

Resources and Research Data Management Plan (Describe the resources required and the data you expect to acquire or generate during this research project, how you will manage, describe, analyse, and store the data and what mechanisms you will use to share and preserve your data.)

Project will be managed in a GitHub repository:

<https://github.com/jhell1717/MScProject2025/tree/Planning>

All models will be updated and shared via this repository with the final selected model for geometry encoding being packaged into a Python package that a user can deploy on their own local machine through a pip install from the GitHub repo.

Many industry-relevant problems exhibit complex failure behaviour influenced by multiple factors that may not be apparent or comprehensible. Consequently, to avoid distracting from the underlying principles, the data will be simplified to two-dimensional geometric shapes. Adding additional complexity cannot be reasonably justified in accordance with the objectives of this research and risks obscuring the predictive accuracy and performance of selected models in isolation of challenge-problem induced error sources. This approach is often commonly referred to as “toy problems,” more accurately representing a landscape for benchmarking and building fundamental understanding at an appropriate complexity before proceeding through a hierarchy of validation levels.

Planned outputs/publications/research datasets/impact/dissemination

The output from this research will be a comprehensive study of methods that sample efficient design space exploration.

Proceeding a comparison of different methods for reducing high-dimensional challenges to low dimensional sample space, deployment to a simple optimisation will be performed. This is likely to be compactness of a 2D shape, as a pseudo metric for heat losses in physical components.

A literature review of existing approaches will be performed, along with a substantial research paper documenting methodologies, results, discussions, limitations, conclusions and recommendations for methods that should be extended to industry specific use-cases.

The best performing model will be selected and produced as a tool that a practitioner could install locally to perform aid their design space exploration and optimisation.



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If successful, I undertake to carry out the research according to the University's Ethics code of Practice. I realise that I will not proceed into data collection without an ethical approval in place

(Applicant's signature required)

Date and signature of Supervisor approval