



Meta-Heuristic Solutions to a Student Grouping Optimization Problem faced in Higher Education Institutions

Kenekayoro Patrick^{1*} and Biralatei Fawei¹

¹Department of Mathematics and Computer Science, Niger Delta University, Amassoma, Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. KP designed the study and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. KP and BF performed the analyses of the study and managed the literature searches. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Article Information

DOI: 10.9734/JAMCS/2020/v35i730304

Editor(s):

(1) Dr. Leo Willyanto Santoso, Petra Christian University, Indonesia.

Reviewers:

(1) Shahram Saeidi, Mazandaran University of Science and Technology, Iran.

(2) Isra Natheer Alkallak, University of Mosul, Iraq.

(3) C. K. Gomathy, Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi Viswa Mahavidyalaya University (SCSVMV) University, India.

Complete Peer review History: <http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/61487>

Received: 20 July 2020

Accepted: 26 September 2020

Published: 01 October 2020

Original Research Article

Abstract

Combinatorial problems which have been proven to be NP-hard are faced in Higher Education Institutions and researches have extensively investigated some of the well-known combinatorial problems such as the timetabling and student project allocation problems. However, NP-hard problems faced in Higher Education Institutions are not only confined to these categories of combinatorial problems. The majority of NP-hard problems faced in institutions involve grouping students and/or resources, albeit with each problem having its own unique set of constraints. Thus, it can be argued that techniques to solve NP-hard problems in Higher Education Institutions can be transferred across the different problem categories. As no method is guaranteed to outperform all others in all problems, it is necessary to investigate heuristic techniques for solving lesser-known problems in order to guide stakeholders or software developers to the most appropriate algorithm for each unique class of NP-hard problems faced in Higher Education

*Corresponding author: E-mail: Patrick.Kenekayoro@outlook.com;

Institutions. To this end, this study described an optimization problem faced in a real university that involved grouping students for the presentation of semester results. Ordering based heuristics, genetic algorithm and the ant colony optimization algorithm implemented in Python programming language were used to find feasible solutions to this problem, with the ant colony optimization algorithm performing better or equal in 75% of the test instances and the genetic algorithm producing better or equal results in 38% of the test instances.

Keywords: Genetic algorithm; meta-heuristics; ant colony optimization; student grouping; combinatorial problem.

1 Introduction

NP-hard problems, among which include the University Course Timetabling Problem, Examination Timetabling Problem and Student Project Allocation Problem are faced annually in Higher Education Institutions. These problems and strategies to tackle them efficiently have been researched extensively. However, there is a dearth of research on a combinatorial problem that involves grouping students for the presentation of semester results.

In some Higher Education Institutions, it is necessary to present the examination results of students in a programme. The document presented in a tabular form usually contains students in rows and courses as column headers, where the value of Table(i,j) is the examination score of student i in course j. Given that students register/write exams for different courses and there is only a fixed number of courses that could appear as column headers for the result presentation document to be legible, it becomes necessary to group students into subsets such that the union of the courses students took exams for in each group is not more than the number required for the creation of a legible document. As each group will have a unique set of course headers and may need to start on a new page in the document, the argument is that fewer groups will need fewer pages to be presented which will save resources for institutions that store printed copy of result summaries and also result in smaller sizes of the documents in electronic form. The Student Result Grouping (SRG) problem in its simplest form is thus to find the student groupings such that the number of groups is minimized. Institutions may have additional constraints and the Student Result Grouping problem from the university used as the case study in this research is described in the next section.

The SRG problem in the case study university has been solved by greedily assigning or creating groups based on the order students were stored in the database, but this research aims to use heuristic techniques such as the genetic algorithm and the ant colony optimization algorithm to find more suitable solutions to this problem.

2 Related Work

The Student Result Grouping Problem in this study, albeit with its unique requirements is a subset of previously researched NP-hard problems faced in Higher Education Institutions. The University Course Timetabling Problem (UCTP) and Examination Timetabling Problem (ETP) are arguably the most popular of this category of NP-hard problems. The UCTP and ETP involve scheduling events in a Higher Education Institution based on available resources(rooms or facilities) and student or staff specific requirements.

Meta-heuristics techniques such as Tabu Search [1, 2], Simulated Annealing [3], Ant Colony Optimization [4] have been investigated for solving these NP-hard problems. [5] exhaustively analysed the approaches among others that have been used successfully used to find optimal solutions to these problems.

The techniques [5] reviewed can be transferred to solving other grouping problems faced in Higher Institutions that such as the Student Problem Allocation Problem have been shown to be NP-hard [6]. For example, Manlove et al. [6] has solved a Student Project Allocation Problem with Integer Programming and Kenekayoro et al. [7] found optimal solutions with Ant Colony Optimization, Genetic Algorithm and the Gravitational Search Algorithm.

Hence, the Student Grouping Problem can be seen as a classic NP-hard problem that can be solved using meta-heuristic techniques that have been researched extensively. This research reports on using the Genetic Algorithm, Ant Colony Optimization and an ordering based heuristic to solve a unique grouping problem faced a case study Higher Education Institution.

3 Student Result Grouping (SRG) Problem

A dataset containing a list of students with courses they took examinations for as shown in Table 1. and a list of courses with the year the courses were introduced to students as shown in Table 2. represents the information available to produce a suitable grouping.

Table 1. List of students with the courses the students registered

Student	Course
11100011	CMP301
11100011	MTH101
11200012	CMP436
11200012	CMP421

Table 2. Courses and the year the courses are introduced to students

Student	Course
CMP301	3 rd
MTH101	1 st
CMP436	4 th
CMP421	4 th

Assuming that we are to generate groupings for fourth-year students, new courses are fourth-year courses while other courses are categorised as old. In the case study university, students are not allowed the register or take examinations for courses they have not been introduced to. Consequently, fourth-year students can register for any course but third-year students can register for only first, second and third-year courses.

After examinations, the student grouping problem involves grouping students in a programme such that:

1. All students are assigned to a group.
2. The number of unique courses taken by all students in each group is less than 26.
3. The number of unique new courses taken by all students in each group is less than 13.
4. The number of unique old courses taken by all students in each group is less than 13.

The numbers in the objectives above were determined to be the most appropriate for legible presentation of results in an A4 sheet by the case study institution. fourth-year students in the case study university can register courses from any level, thus presenting results for this set of students is a harder problem compared to students at lower levels.

3.1 Mathematical formulation

The Student Result Grouping Problem is made up of a set of students $\{S_1 \dots S_m\}$, set of courses $\{C_1 \dots C_n\}$ and set of years $\{Y_1 \dots Y_o\}$; Y being the years a student can spend in the university ($Y_1 = \text{first year students}$ and $Y_o = \text{final year students}$).

Students are grouped according to the number of years currently spent in the university $SY_j \in \{S_1 \dots S_m\}$ and each course $C_i \in \{C_1 \dots C_n\}$ is introduced to students SY_j in a particular year $Y_j \in \{Y_1 \dots Y_o\}$.

Exams are taken for Courses. CY_j is the set of courses introduced to students SY_j in year Y_j . Students are not allowed to take exams for courses they have not been introduced to.

For each student $S_k \in SY_j$, course C_i is classified as old if $C_i \notin CY_j$, otherwise ($C_i \in CY_j$), it is classified as new.

The Student Result Grouping Problem groups all students in a particular year (SY) to subgroups SG . SG is a set of groups $\{SG_1 \dots SG_k\}$ with each group in SG a subset of the students in SY ; $SG \in SY$ and CG the courses students in SG took exams for. The Student Result Grouping Problem groups students whilst ensuring that:

1. All students are assigned to a group.
 $SG_1 \cup SG_2 \cup \dots \cup SG_k = SY$
2. No student is assigned to more than one group
 $n(SG_1) + n(SG_2) + \dots + n(SG_k) = n(SY)$
3. The number of unique courses taken by all students in each group is less than 26
 $n(CG) < 26$
4. The number of unique new courses taken by all students in each group is less than 13
 $n(CG; \text{if } CG_i \text{ is classified as new}) < 13$
5. The number of unique old courses taken by all students in each group is less than 13
 $n(CG; \text{if } CG_i \text{ is classified as old}) < 13$

3.2 Data

The dataset downloadable from <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.12116667> is in the format shown in Table 3. with each row showing a student, a course and the year the course was introduced to the student.

Table 3. An example instance in the dataset available from <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.12116667>

Student	Course	Year
111011	CMP201	2
111011	CMP421	4
...
...
...
303101	CMP401	4

Table 4. shows the description of instances in the dataset, which shows an overview of fourth-year students examination/course registrations from the Computer Science department of the case study institution.

Table 4. Description of instances in the Student Result Grouping dataset

Name	New Courses	Old Courses	No. of Students
RGD41107	28	15	140
RGD4152	13	20	97
RGD4185	27	20	121
RGD42118	8	0	25
RGD4263	19	20	132
RGD4296	23	17	193
RGD41118	10	1	18
RGD4196	26	17	185
RGD4241	8	21	67
RGD4274	20	23	147
RGD4141	9	17	68
RGD4174	29	19	149
RGD42107	26	16	123
RGD4252	9	24	95
RGD4285	19	21	128
RGD4163	26	17	128

4 Methods

Heuristic algorithms have successfully been used to solve NP-hard problems such as the Student Project Allocation Problem [7, 8, 9] and the Nurse Rostering Problem [10, 11].

Heuristic techniques that find satisfactory solutions to the Examination and Course timetabling problems have also been extensively investigated [12, 13, 4, 14]. Implementation of some of these algorithms are available as packages, for example, DEAP - Distributed Evolutionary Algorithms in Python [15] is a python implementation of the Genetic algorithm. This study explores the use of some well-known algorithms to solve the combinatorial problem in this research and compares the quality of resulting solutions.

4.1 Evaluation/Fitness function

The fitness or evaluation function is arguably the most important aspect of a heuristic algorithm. It should be a function that not only evaluates the quality of a solution but also guides an algorithm towards optimal solutions. For example, in the fitness function in this study, the penalty for groups that exceed the required number of unique courses is higher in a group with more students compared to a group with fewer students. The reason being that reducing the number of students in a group can guide the algorithm to a solution with a fewer required number of unique course violations (unfit penalty).

Three penalties, unfit penalty, unassigned penalty and size penalty are used in the fitness function to determine the quality of a solution to the student result grouping problem in this research.

Proposition 4.1. *The unfit penalty evaluates if the number of unique new and old courses (cardinality of the set of new and old) offered by students grouped together exceeds the allowed limit (13). This is computed with equations 4.1 and 4.2*

$$gp(old|new) = \begin{cases} n(CG_{old|new}) - 13 & \text{if } n(CG_{old|new}) \geq 13 \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (4.1)$$

$$up = \sum_{i=1}^m (gp_i(new) + gp_i(old)) \times n(SG_i); m \text{ is the no. of student groups} \quad (4.2)$$

Equation 4.1 is used to compute the penalties of new and old courses in groups, while the unfit penalty is determined by the sum of group penalties for all groups in the solution as shown in Equation 4.2.

Proposition 4.2. *The **size penalty** as shown in Equation 4.3 guides algorithms to better solutions by ensuring that the meta-heuristic algorithm favours larger groups instead of smaller groups.*

$$sp = \sum_{i=1}^m (n(SY) - n(SG_i)) \times n(SG_i); m \text{ is the no. of student groups} \quad (4.3)$$

Proposition 4.3. *The **unassigned penalty** penalizes solutions that do not assign groups to all students. It is simply evaluated as the number of students not assigned to a group.*

$$ap = n(SY) - \sum_{i=1}^m n(SG_i); m \text{ is the no. of student groups} \quad (4.4)$$

The final fitness function is the weighted sum of individual penalties as shown in Equation 4.5.

$$f(x) = 1000 \times ap + (\log_2(sp) + up \times 1000) \times n(SG) \quad (4.5)$$

The unfit penalty favours smaller groups because fewer students in a group result in fewer unique courses while the size penalty favours larger groups. As the size penalty is not as a result of a constraint violation, but help guide heuristic algorithms to a solution with a fewer number of groups, its weight is scaled-down compared to the unfit penalty, ensuring that meta-heuristic algorithms will try to reduce the number of groups only when the unique courses in all groups do not exceed the allowed limit.

4.2 Hardest first ordering Heuristics

This is a graph-based technique that has been employed in solving a number of NP-hard problems faced in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), particularly the Education Timetabling Problem. Early techniques [16, 17] that solved timetabling problems ordered events to be scheduled based on the number of constraint violations scheduling that event may cause, or how difficult scheduling that event is, in terms of student or lecturer clashes. For example, using the largest degree first graph heuristic, events with more common students are scheduled first while the least saturated degree schedules events with fewer available timeslots first [17].

In the university timetabling problem, the largest degree first and least saturated degree heuristics are variations of the hardest first heuristic, with difference only in how the hardest event to be scheduled, is determined; largest degree first uses events with a higher number of student groups, while least saturated degree first uses events with fewer available timeslots.

The constraints for the Student Grouping Problem in this study is simpler than the constraints for the Educational Timetabling Problem. The hardest student to be scheduled is simply the student who has taken the highest number of examinations.

The hardest first heuristics thus generates Student Grouping by greedily assigning the hardest student (student with the most courses) to its best-fitting group (the group that results in the least penalty) with no constraint violation. When no such group exists, a new group is created for the student. The pseudocode for the Hardest first heuristic is shown in Algorithm 1.

Algorithm 1: Pseudocode for Student Grouping by the Hardest First Ordering heuristics

Input: List of students and courses offered to be grouped
Output: Array of student grouped into subsets

- 1 $students$ = list of students in decreasing order of the number of courses registered
- 2 SG = Initialization of student group as an empty array
- 3 **for** $i \leftarrow 1$ **to** $length(students)$ **do**
- 4 **if** $students[i]$ can be assigned to any group in SG without any constraint violation **then**
- 5 Assign $students[i]$ to its best-fitting group in SG
- 6 **else**
- 7 Assign $students[i]$ to a newly created group, and add the group to SG
- 8 **return** SG

4.3 Ant colony optimization

The Ant Colony Optimization (ACO) [18] algorithm is inspired from the way ants navigate to a food source through cooperation. Ants drop pheromone trails on promising paths for other ants to follow, and if the path is still promising more pheromones are deposited on the trail, thus increasing the likelihood that other ants will follow the trail. Using this concept, an ant traverses a path to a full solution to an optimization problem. The quality of the solution is determined and then the path is updated based on the quality of the found solution. Over several iterations and ant traversals, the ACO converges to always guide ants to follow the path with the highest pheromone trail, which in turn will lead to an optimal solution.

A number of variations to the ACO exist and have been used to solve meta-heuristic problems such as the University Course Timetabling Problem [19, 4], Student Project Allocation Problem [7], Nurse Rostering Problem [20]. However, the following concepts as described in [7] are the basis of all ACO algorithms.

Representation: The solution search space for an optimization problem can be represented as a graph. An ant traversal from the start node to the end node forms a solution to the optimization problem. For the student grouping problem in this study, each node visited on the graph assigns a student to a group, thus the graph can be represented as an $n \times m$ matrix where n rows is the number of groups and m columns is the number of students to be grouped. The number of groups n is determined by the number of groups in a solution found by the Hardest First Ordering heuristics algorithm, ensuring that final solutions cannot have more groups than the number of groups found using the Hardest First Ordering algorithm.

Initialization: The weight of edges on the graph representing the solution space of an optimization problem determines the probability that an ant will follow that edge. In the Max-Min ant system [19] which used in this study, the maximum edge weight is $T_{max} = 10$ and the minimum edge weight is $T_{min} = 0.1$, with edges (values in the representation matrix) initialized to T_{max} .

Traversal: From an initially empty solution, as an ant traverses the solution space represented as a graph by visiting nodes, each node visited adds a student grouping to the initially empty solution to form an updated partial solution. At the end of an ant traversal, a complete solution to the student grouping problem is found. An ant decides the node that will be added to the partial solution based on a probability determined by the level of pheromone trail and if visiting that node does not result in a constraint violation. Thus, nodes whose edges have higher T values are more likely to be visited than those with lower T values. Here lies the difference between the Hardest First Ordering heuristic algorithm and the Ant Colony Optimization algorithm, the hardest first ordering

heuristic simply assigns a student to its best-fitting group while the ant colony optimization assigns a student to a group based on a probability controlled by a T value that is updated as the ant colony optimization algorithm progresses over several iterations.

Algorithm 2: Pseudocode for ants traversal in an iteration of the Ant Colony Optimization Algorithm

```

1 Initialize the number of ants as numAnts
2 bestSolution = ant traversal of solution space to generate a solution
3 for i ← 2 to numAnts do
4   antSolution = ant traversal of solution space to generate a solution
5   if quality(antSolution) < quality(bestSolution) then
6     bestSolution = antSolution
7 return bestSolution

```

Update: After each iteration, the edges that form a path to the final solution are updated based on the quality of the solution. This depicts the process of ants dropping pheromone trails on promising paths, as higher T values increase the likelihood of subsequent ants following that path. The reward determined from Equation 4.6 is added to the T values on the solution path. In cases when the T value becomes greater than T_{max} the T value is set to T_{max} .

$$reward = \begin{cases} \frac{1}{currentQuality - globalBest} & \text{if } globalBest \geq currentQuality \\ otherwise & \end{cases} \quad (4.6)$$

Evaporation: To avoid convergence to a local minimum the edge weights are reduced after each ant traversal. This depicts the effect of wind reducing the pheromone trails from previously promising paths not followed when a more optimal path is found. Evaporation is particularly important in the ant colony optimization algorithm in this study because there are no negative rewards as shown in Equation 4.6, so evaporation is the only way to reduce the trail (T value) on non-optimal paths which have been initialized to T_{max} . T values are updated through evaporation using Equation 4.7, where ρ in the range of 0.1 to 0.9 controls the rate of evaporation. Higher evaporation rate speeds up convergence but reduces the solution space searched. In cases where the T value becomes less than T_{min} , the T value is set to T_{min} .

$$T_{new} = T_{old} \times (1 - \rho) \quad (4.7)$$

Algorithm 3: Pseudocode of the Ant Colony Optimization for solving the Student Result Grouping Problem

```

1 n = number of groups determined by the number of groups in the solution by hardest first
  heuristic algorithm
2 m = number of students
3  $T_{max} = 10$ ,  $T_{min} = 0.1$ ,  $\rho = 0.02$ , globalBest = None
4 SG =  $n \times m$  matrix with values initialised to  $T_{max}$ 
5 for i ← 1 to numIterations do
6   cycleBest = ant traversal as described in Algorithm 2
7   Reduce pheromone trail in SG by evaporation
8   Update pheromone trail in cycleBest's solution path
9   if quality(cycleBest) < quality(globalBest) then
10    globalBest = cycleBest
11 return globalSolution

```

Three parameters guide the Min-Max ant colony optimization algorithm to a solution, ρ which controls the speed of evaporation, α which controls the probability that the subsequent student

to be grouped is selected by hardest first heuristic and β which controls the probability that the next student to be grouped is selected by the level pheromone trail on its path. In this study, the parameters were manually tuned to $\rho = 0.02$; $\alpha = 0$; $\beta = 1$, however, as all possible values were not investigated in this study, it may be possible to achieve better solutions with different values.

4.4 Genetic algorithm (GA)

Inspired from natural evolution the Genetic Algorithm for local search [21] creates an initial population of solutions to an optimization problem and updates the population in subsequent generations through mutation, crossover and selection operators. These genetic operators which are used in solving the student result grouping problem are described subsequently.

Representation: Unlike the ACO and hardest first ordering heuristic algorithms described in previous sections, final solutions are not constructed in a way such that no constraint is violated. An individual in the population as shown in Fig 1. is simply represented as a list of integers where the position i on the list represents $Student_i$ and the value in the i^{th} position represents the group $Student_i$ has been assigned to. The length of an individual is the number of students to be grouped and the number of unique values (allele) in the list of integers is the number of groups in the solution.

Heuristic information that is used in the ACO to determine the maximum number of groups is not used in the GA solution. Allele values (group a student is assigned to) is set to a random number in the range not greater than the number of students to be grouped, thus in the worst case, the final number of groups will be equal to the number of students. As heuristic information is not used to

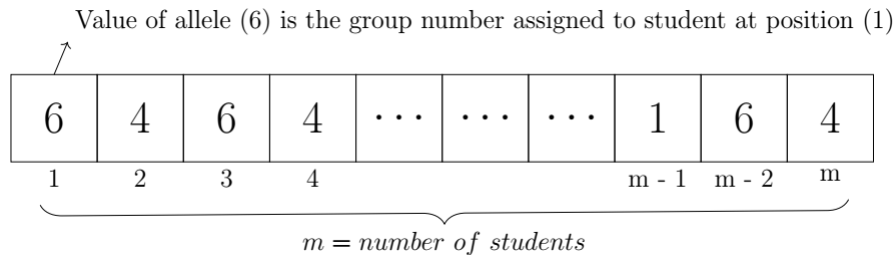


Fig. 1. An individual in a GA population that represents a solution to the Student Result Grouping Problem

generate the initial population of the GA, the quality of solutions is significantly worse than the first iteration of the ACO but a wider solution space is searched.

Evaluation: Individuals are evaluated by the fitness function shown in Equation 4.5. The fitness function is especially important for the GA to guide the algorithm towards better solutions. For example, if two individuals have the same number of groups, the evaluation function ensures that the fitter individual is the individual that needs fewer modifications to result in a fewer number of total groups.

Crossover: The crossover operator combines two individuals (parents) in the current population to generate two new individuals (offsprings) that will make up the population of the next generation. Single point crossover, two-point crossover, and uniform crossover are popular approaches to mate parents to produce offsprings through crossover. Magalhes-Mendes [22] compared the efficiency of different crossover approaches for a job scheduling problem, with experiments showing the single point crossover to produce the best average performance. However, in a study [7] that solved the student project allocation problem, the type of crossover operator did not have any significant

influence on the performance of the genetic algorithm, emphasizing that no method is guaranteed to outperform others in all problems.

Mutation The mutation operator changes a single allele in an individual. In this study, the mutation operator changes the value of an allele to a random integer not greater than the total number of students to be grouped.

Selection: A subset of individuals from the parents (individuals in the current generation) and offsprings (determined through mutation and crossover operators) are selected to make up the population of the next generation. The python library DEAP [15] that is used in this study implements a number of selection techniques. Amongst which are tournament and roulette wheel selection methods that are widely used for single-objective genetic algorithms such as the student grouping problem in this study.

In tournament selection which is regarded as one of the most popular selection strategies for genetic algorithms [23] given a tournament size n , a random number of n individuals are selected from the parents and offsprings and the best individuals in each m tournaments make up the individuals in the next generation.

In roulette wheel selection, from a set of individuals (parents and offsprings), an individual is selected for the next generation by a probability proportional to its fitness. The probability of a fitter individual to be selected is higher than less fit individuals.

Razali and Geraghty [24] has shown that tournament selection can outperform other selection techniques for some optimization problems, thus this strategy with a tournament size ($n = 3$), probability of mutation = 0.5 and probability of crossover = 0.5 is used in the genetic algorithm in this study.

Algorithm 4: Pseudocode of the genetic algorithm for solving the student result grouping problem

```

1   $m =$  population size
2  create the initial population with  $m$  number of individuals
3  while stopping condition not met do
4      Generate offsprings by crossover and mutation operations on parents
5      Evaluate the fitness of offsprings
6      Select individuals form parents and offsprings for the next generation by tournament
       selection whilst preserving the fittest individual
7  return fittest individual in the final population

```

Using the building blocks of the genetic algorithm as previously described and implemented in DEAP python library, the algorithm is run until 20 non-improving generations is reached. The pseudocode of the genetic algorithm is shown in Algorithm 4.

5 Result and Discussion

Table 5. and Table 6. show the result of grouping students with the Hardest First Ordering, the Genetic Algorithm, Ant Colony Optimization and the Random Ordering meta-heuristic techniques. The values in Table 5. and Table 6. indicate the quality (minimum, maximum and average) of solutions determined by Equation 4.5 after each algorithm was run 10 times.

The Hardest First Ordering heuristic is deterministic thus does not benefit from restarts as other algorithms with some degree of randomness.

In the majority of cases, the ant colony optimization algorithm performed better than other algorithms, however, the Hardest First Ordering heuristic can produce a good enough solution with fewer trials compared to others.

Table 5. Result of grouping students for the presentation of examination scores whilst satisfying the SRG problem constraints listed in Section 2 with the Hardest First Ordering (HFO) and Random Ordering (RO) meta-heuristic techniques

Instance	HFO			RO		
	Min	Max	Avg	Min	Max	Avg
RGD41107	95.423	95.423	95.423	86.44	171.93	108.66
RGD4152	118.14	118.14	118.14	75.18	108.17	90.25
RGD4185	175.34	175.34	175.34	128.75	260.89	183.31
RGD42118	4.70	4.70	4.70	4.70	4.70	4.70
RGD4263	191.29	191.29	191.29	156.53	249.02	193.43
RGD4296	109.16	109.16	109.16	104.45	174.86	141.71
RGD41118	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25
RGD4196	136.30	136.30	136.30	104.01	192.17	149.45
RGD4241	147.09	147.09	147.09	104.50	194.42	150.24
RGD4274	171.90	171.90	171.90	166.85	302.35	233.21
RGD4141	50.19	50.19	50.19	33.08	67.81	49.89
RGD4174	98.64	98.64	98.64	100.04	179.63	134.71
RGD42107	65.03	65.03	65.03	60.88	115.93	83.16
RGD4252	13435.17	13435.17	13435.17	14443.08	18726.77	16668.17
RGD4285	176.58	176.58	176.58	198.65	287.94	244.73
RGD4163	60.59	60.59	60.59	57.62	84.50	69.98

Table 6. Result of grouping students for the presentation of examination scores whilst satisfying the SRG problem constraints listed in Section 2 with the Genetic Algorithm (GA) and the Ant Colony Optimization (ACO) meta-heuristic techniques

Instance	GA			ACO		
	Min	Max	Avg	Min	Max	Avg
RGD41107	89.12	98.69	92.25	69.76	91.73	83.61
RGD4152	75.78	84.32	78.27	58.00	78.09	66.37
RGD4185	129.15	164.32	143.53	127.20	160.73	134.17
RGD42118	4.70	4.70	4.70	4.70	4.70	4.70
RGD4263	125.66	218.49	175.16	132.36	161.31	139.11
RGD4296	101.17	143.23	113.64	99.53	108.43	104.50
RGD41118	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25
RGD4196	101.35	136.45	126.60	101.32	113.00	103.21
RGD4241	123.20	154.45	134.55	104.26	115.17	108.99
RGD4274	166.01	239.39	209.11	178.53	191.91	184.68
RGD4141	33.08	51.43	44.58	33.08	34.10	33.33
RGD4174	96.00	143.21	105.09	95.40	104.47	97.89
RGD42107	60.50	89.86	72.05	57.97	59.19	58.40
RGD4252	14417.77	14417.77	14417.77	14459.32	15560.84	14811.29
RGD4285	158.29	237.22	196.17	180.56	240.65	207.61
RGD4163	58.86	84.58	66.25	57.25	57.75	57.38

The algorithms, apart from the GA are guaranteed to produce a feasible solution (all grouping conditions are met) when such a grouping exists. Partial solutions are generatively updated in such a way that a student is assigned to a group that meets all assignment conditions, and when no such group exists, a new group is created. In the random and hardest first ordering heuristics, students are grouped greedily (assigned to the best fitting group), while in the ant colony optimization algorithm, an assignment is based on a probability controlled by the pheromone trail. Thus, the quality of these algorithms is largely dependent on the order in which students are assigned to groups.

The GA does not update partial solutions ensuring that each update does not break feasibility but generates a complete solution randomly and then iteratively updates the solution through mutation

and crossover operations until an optimal solution is found. As a result of this, the majority of individuals in the initial generations of the Genetic Algorithm are infeasible solutions.

Generating solutions for the GA is faster than other algorithms in this study as each student assigned to a group does not require an evaluation to check for feasibility, but the GA requires more iterations to converge to an optimal solution. The fitness function is also important because even though the main aim is to have a minimal number of groups, from the fitness function, the GA should be able to identify which solution is closer to the feasibility even if they have the same number of student groups.

Given that 26 columns (13 for new courses and 13 for old courses) are available to show student results, 13 fixed number of columns are reserved for new and old courses. In special cases such as in the RGD4252 instance, it is not possible to find a feasible solution because a student in that instance took exams for more than 13 new courses. Thus, it may be necessary to allow groups to have a flexible number of columns for new or old courses, so that in special cases columns reserved of new or old courses may be changed dynamically.

As the ACO outperformed other algorithms as shown in Table 6. Table 7. shows the quality of solutions achieved when the number of columns for new and old courses was dynamically determined. The quality of solutions when the columns are dynamic is better than those achieved with a fixed number of columns and feasible solutions were found for all instances in the dataset used in this study.

Table 7. Result of grouping students for presentation of results using the Ant Colony Optimization Algorithm with dynamic number of columns

Instance	Min	Max	Average
RGD41107	70.59	91.47	86.27
RGD4152	59.79	78.89	71.23
RGD4185	127.16	160.42	132.84
RGD42118	4.70	4.70	4.70
RGD4263	130.81	166.45	137.03
RGD4296	98.98	110.66	103.34
RGD41118	4.25	4.25	4.25
RGD4196	98.98	110.66	103.34
RGD4241	104.58	123.63	111.27
RGD4274	183.42	244.98	198.40
RGD4141	33.08	34.10	33.30
RGD4174	96.11	104.27	98.39
RGD42107	57.97	59.30	58.50
RGD4252	453.06	529.19	495.70
RGD4285	183.63	235.45	211.56
RGD4163	57.25	58.09	57.33

6 Conclusions

Several NP-hard problems are faced annually in Higher Education Institutions, among these problems include the timetabling and project allocation problems which have been extensively researched. The student result grouping problem is similar to other NP-hard problems faced in HEIs as it also involves grouping students albeit with its unique constraints. Thus, techniques used in solving other NP-hard problems can be adapted to solve the student result grouping problem investigated in this study.

This study elaborately described the student result grouping problem faced in a case study Higher Education Institution and found suitable solutions to this problem by ordering heuristics (hardest first and random ordering), ants colony optimization and the genetic algorithm, demonstrating the possibility of solving this kind of problems with well-known heuristic techniques that have been used in solving other categories of NP-hard problems.

The genetic and the ant colony optimization algorithms performed better than ordering based techniques and an adaptation of the problem in the case study institution improved the quality of final solutions. Ordering based heuristics can, however, be used to find a quick good enough solution.

The parameters for the ant colony optimization and genetic algorithms were manually tuned, so better results may be achieved with more effective parameter search algorithms.

In the case study institution, the student result grouping problem was previously solved by greedily assigning or creating groups based on the order students were stored in the database. In most instances, the final solutions were worse than any of the techniques investigated in this study. Thus, research on other lesser-known combinatorial problems faced in institutions which report on adequate methods that can be used to find suitable solutions to these problems will be particularly beneficial to education software developers.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank the reviewers for their useful comments.

Competing Interests

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

References

- [1] Salwani Abdullah, Hamza Turabieh. On the use of multi neighbourhood structures within a Tabu-based memetic approach to university timetabling problems. *Information Sciences*. 2012;191:146-168.
- [2] Zhipeng Lü, Jin-Kao Hao, Zhipeng L. Adaptive Tabu Search for course timetabling. *European Journal of Operational Research*. 2010;200(1):235-244.
- [3] Salwani Abdullah, Khalid Shaker, Barry Mccollum, Paul McMullan. Dual sequence simulated annealing with round-robin approach for university course timetabling. *Evolutionary Computation in Combinatorial Optimization*. Springer-Verlag. 2010;1-10.
- [4] Patrick Kenekayoro, Godswill Zipamone. Greedy ants colony optimization strategy for solving the curriculum based university course timetabling problem. *British Journal of Mathematics & Computer Science*. 2016;14(2):1-10.
- [5] Hamed Babaei, Jaber Karimpour, Amin Hadidi. A survey of approaches for university course timetabling problem. *Computers and Industrial Engineering*. 2015;86:43-59.
- [6] David Manlove, Duncan Milne, Sofiat Olaosebikan. Student-project allocation with preferences over projects: Algorithmic and experimental results. *Discrete Applied Mathematics*; 2020.
- [7] Patrick Kenekayoro, Promise Mebine, Bodouwei Godswill Zipamone. Population based techniques for solving the student project allocation problem. *International Journal of Applied Metaheuristic Computing (IJAMC)*. 2020;11(2):192-207.
- [8] Marco Chiarandini, Rolf Fagerberg, Stefano Gualandi. Handling preferences in student-project allocation. *Annals of Operations Research*. 2018;1-40.
- [9] Augustine Kwanashie, Robert W. Irving, David F. Manlove, Colin T. S. Sng. Profile-based optimal matchings in the student/project allocation problem. *International Workshop on Combinatorial Algorithms*. Springer, Cham. 2015;213-225.
- [10] Mohammed A. Awadallah, Ahamad Tajudin Khader, Mohammed Azmi Al-Betar, Asaju La'aro Bolaji. Global best Harmony Search with a new pitch adjustment designed for Nurse Rostering. *Journal of King Saud University - Computer and Information Sciences*. 2013;25(2):145-162.

- [11] Ghaith M. Jaradat, Anas Al-Badareen, Ayob M, Mutasem Al-Smadi, Ibrahim Al-Marashdeh, Mahmoud Ash-Shuqran, Eyas Al-Odat. Hybrid elitist-ant system for nurse-rostering problem. *Journal of King Saud University - Computer and Information Sciences*. 2019;31(3):378-384.
- [12] Jingpeng Li, Edmund K Burke, Rong Qu. A pattern recognition based intelligent search method and two assignment problem case studies. *Applied Intelligence*. 2010;36(2):442-453.
- [13] HY Al Tarawneh, Masri Ayob. Using Tabu search with multi-neighborhood structures to solve University Course Timetable UKM case study (faculty of engineering). *Data Mining and Optimization (DMO)*. 2011;28-29.
- [14] Ayla Gülcü, Can Akkan. Robust university course timetabling problem subject to single and multiple disruptions. *European Journal of Operational Research*. 2020;283(2):630-646.
- [15] Félix Antoine Fortin, Francois Michel De Rainville, Marc-André Gardner, Marc Parizeau, Christian Gagné. DEAP: Evolutionary algorithms made easy. *Journal of Machine Learning Research*. 2012;13:2171-2175.
- [16] Rong Qu, Edmund K. Burke, Barry McCollum. Adaptive automated construction of hybrid heuristics for exam timetabling and graph colouring problems. *European Journal of Operational Research*. 2009;198(2):392-404.
- [17] Edmund Burke, Barry MacCloumn, Amnon Meisels, Sanja Petrovic, Rong Qu. A graph-based hyper heuristic for timetabling problems. *European Journal of Operational Research*. 2010;176:177-192.
- [18] Dorigo M, Maniezzo V, Colorni A. Ant system: optimization by a colony of cooperating agents. *Systems, Man, and Cybernetics, Part B: Cybernetics, IEEE Transactions*. 1996;26(1):29-41.
- [19] Krzysztof Socha, Joshua Knowles, Michael Sampels. A MAX - MIN ant system for the university course timetabling problem. *Lecture notes in computer science: Proceedings of the 3rd international workshop on ant algorithms*. Springer Berlin. 2002;1-13.
- [20] Razamin Ramli. A hybrid ant colony optimization algorithm for solving a highly constrained nurse rostering problem. *Journal of Information and Communication Technology*. 2020;18(3):305-326.
- [21] Nico Ulder, Emile Aarts, Hans-Jürgen Bandelt, Peter van Laarhoven, Erwin Pesch. Genetic local search algorithms for the traveling salesman problem parallel problem solving from nature. In Hans-Paul Schwefel, Reinhard Männer, Editors. *International Conference on Parallel Problem Solving from Nature*. Lecture Notes in Computer Science. Springer Berlin / Heidelberg. 1990;496:109-116.
- [22] Jorge Magalhães-Mendes. A comparative study of crossover operators for genetic algorithms to solve the job shop scheduling problem. *WSEAS Transactions on Computers*. 2013;12(4):164-173.
- [23] Vladimi Filipović. Fine-grained tournament selection operator in genetic algorithms. *Computing and Informatics*. 2012;22(2):143-161.
- [24] Noraini Mohd Razali, John Geraghty. Genetic algorithm performance with different selection strategies in solving TSP. In *Proceedings of the World Congress on Engineering*. 2011;2:1134-1139. London

© 2020 Patrick and Fawei; This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Peer-review history:

The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here (Please copy paste the total link in your browser address bar)
<http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/61487>