

NTNU European Conference

Knowledge for a Better World: R&I Recipes for Inclusive, Sustainable Development

26 November 2018, Brussels

On the 26th of November 2018 I got a priceless opportunity to travel to Brussels for an annual conference organized by my alma mater NTNU. I have followed the conferences they organized previous years, and even though they were always exciting they were never really suitable for the topics I studied.

I was very pleased to take part in the conference this year because I have started studying Globalisation and Sustainable Development, which is a new area for me, although I do have a lot of interest in it. I wanted to get some up-to-date insight because this is something, I feel, education often fails to provide us. This semester I also started an internship at EVRY, which is a leading Nordic IT company, where I am working with AI and innovation.

This year's conference was inspired by the present political landscape and developments in the research, democracy and innovation sectors in Europe. With UN's sustainable development goals in mind, the conference focuses on three fundamental aspects for a healthy society: Democracy, Education, Research and Innovation.

On this picture you can see the opening part of the conference and the rector of NTNU Gunnar Bovim giving an introductory speech.



Conference consisted of two main parts. The first part was split into three parallel panel sessions:

1. How can research help safeguard democracy?

This section's purpose was to provide key insights into how elections, values and political communication can improve, but also challenge European societies.

2. Autonomous Systems and AI

Digitalisation is one of the factors that drive transformation not only in businesses, but also in marketplaces, governments and society in general. Autonomous systems, such as self-driving cars and vessels, etc. are one of the technologies likely to have a major impact on the society.

3. Quo vadis Erasmus? Status and future

Finally, the last section was dedicated to the Erasmus programme and looked at the impact it produced on higher education in Europe, its positive and negative aspects and the innovative potential in its future shaping.

As much as I wanted to split in three parts and listen to all the parallel panels, I could only choose one. Since I am working with the artificial intelligence at my internship, I decided that I would like to learn more about how it could be used to make our society more sustainable and stayed for the section 2 – Autonomous systems and AI.

Several years ago, Ray Kurzweil in his book “The Singularity Is Near” argued that what sets our age apart from the previous ones is the accelerating pace of technological advance — an acceleration made possible by the digitization of everything. Because of this unprecedented pace of change, according to him, we’re just a few decades away from principally becoming one with computers. This development will modify notions of “intelligence,” Kurzweil noted, and even make it possible to upload digitized versions of our own brains to the cloud so that some form of “us” lives forever.

It is comforting to know that this prediction has not fulfilled yet, but it is astonishing how rapidly AI develops and how broad the application scope of it is now, compared to before: it includes a lot from technology to health and finances. The further ability of AI powered technologies to handle huge amounts of data at a high speed will allow businesses to improve the quality of their services and products, at the same time, making the everyday work for some professionals much more enjoyable and productive.

In this section I got to hear several speakers that were describing their own projects of the actual use of the technology. In particular, Egil Eide, Associate Professor from the Department of Electronic Systems at NTNU talked about their project in which they are developing an autonomous shuttle ferry in Trondheim. The ferry would serve as an integrated solution ensuring a robust transportation system. It would be a self-driving ferry, which would be able to dock itself at a pier for the passengers to onboard. It deploys a lot of sensors for extra safety and avoiding collisions with the marine transport. It would be cheaper than a bridge and have low environmental impact. This is a very interesting project which is quite relevant for Trondheim, as the Nidelven river flows through the whole city. Having studied in Trondheim myself for 3 years, I didn’t hear about this project.

Another speaker I was excited to hear was Cécile Huet, Deputy Head, Unit Robotics and Artificial Intelligence from the European Commission. Previously I finished bachelor’s in European Studies, so it was quite rewarding to finally hear and see the people working at one of the bodies of the EU – European Commission.

To sum up, in this session, together with the speakers, we explored the prospects of AI and its use. Because it is not all black and white, some very serious questions were brought up: Which promises does the technological development envision? What are the possible impacts on society? What about ethics?

The second part consisted of a quick summary of all the sections to give some idea what was discussed on the sessions that one could not attend. Between the sessions there was networking lunch and dinner, because the conference was partly organised by NTNU Alumni and they wanted the people to collaborate with each other more even after the graduation.

As a conclusion I would like to say that going to the NTNU European conference was a valuable experience that helped me to bridge my interests in innovation with my interests in sustainable development. I would definitely send my follow-up questions to the speakers and try to do more research about the projects I’ve heard about. There is definitely a lot of

inspiration for me for a future master thesis, which was one of the aims for me to go to the conference. All my expectations were fulfilled and I am dearly grateful to the NUUG foundation for providing a scholarship to make this trip possible.

Valeriya Klementyeva