

HCI in the 1980s: The legacy of the HUSAT Research Center

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I formally entered the HCI field as a newly minted Masters student who joined the HUSAT Research Center (as it was then, before later being named an Institute) at Loughborough. I came via the emerging human factors research group at University College Cork where I had studied with Jurek Kirakowski, who went on to develop various evaluation survey tools such as WAMMI. At Loughborough I went on to earn a PhD while working full time on multiple research projects funded by CEC-Esprit, ALVEY, and industry before leaving in 1993 to pursue my career in the US.

HUSAT offered an unusual environment for a new professional. Existing largely on soft-moneys from funding agencies and industry, the group offered young HCI and 'ergonomics' graduates an entry to the profession. Having started some 15 years before I joined with 4 founding members led by Brian Shackel, it remained relatively small until the late 80s when funding opportunities seemed to expand with growing EC investment in joint academic-industrial research efforts to raise the competitiveness of European IT, resulting in HUSAT expanding in size to more than 50 full-time researchers plus associated technical and administrative staff by 1994. The group existed on recurring contracts tied to grants that we were under constant pressure to obtain. HUSAT bootstrapped itself into an organization that offered formal ranks and promotional criteria while researchers worked within and across teams on several projects simultaneously so as to limit the impact of funding completion dates on individual security. Despite contemporary efforts to limit contract research appointments to no more than six years in total, many researchers built careers at HUSAT for considerably longer, putting the center into some conflict not only with its own academic union but with Loughborough University administration.

Culturally, the group seemed to divide into research and more consulting focused people and while efforts were made to give each member an opportunity to do both, personal choices and abilities tended to encourage self-selection into one or other camp. Young professionals often found themselves thrust into high level meetings with industrial partners, both a challenge and an opportunity, and turnover was high given the emerging pull of better salaries and greater security in industry. Collectively, the HUSAT center generated a massive amount of research on the application of social science to IT and organizational design but too little of it was codified into academic output that was shared with the broader scholarly community. While other academic units became active in HCI scholarship, few if any matched the size and scope of work covered at HUSAT. The center housed an industrial-strength usability lab and ran continual tests on emerging technologies, including some of the first experimental work on electronic texts, the distraction of emerging phone technologies in cars, and the development of metrics for interface quality, most of which was provided directly to industrial partners.

In the present contribution, I would like to revisit the contributions made by the HUSAT Research Institute from a participant or source perspective to situate the group more centrally in the history of HCI within the UK and beyond

In considering HUSAT, one might also explore how the pressure to secure funding negatively impacted the scholarly output of some groups and if universities could learn lessons from this in terms of managing academic careers and setting standards for evaluation and performance.