Abstract—Nuclear segmentation, classification and quantification within Haematoxylin & Eosin stained histology images enables the extraction of interpretable cell-based features that can be used in downstream explainable models in computational pathology. The Colon Nuclei Identification and Counting (CoNIC) Challenge is held to help drive forward research and innovation for automatic nuclei recognition in computational pathology. This report describes our proposed method submitted to the CoNIC challenge. Our method employs a multi-task learning framework, which performs a panoptic segmentation task and a regression task. For the panoptic segmentation task, we use encoder-decoder type deep neural networks predicting a direction map in addition to a segmentation map in order to separate neighboring nuclei into different instances.

Index Terms—Computational pathology, Panoptic segmentation, Composition regression, Deep learning

I. INTRODUCTION

Nuclear segmentation, classification and quantification within Haematoxylin & Eosin stained histology images enables the extraction of interpretable cell-based features that can be used in downstream explainable models in computational pathology. The Colon Nuclei Identification and Counting (CoNIC) Challenge is held to help drive forward research and innovation for automatic nuclei recognition in computational pathology [1]. The CoNIC challenge consists of two separate tasks. The first task (Task 1) is called “Nuclear segmentation and classification”. The purpose of this task is to segment nuclei within the tissue, while also classifying each nucleus into one of the following six categories: epithelial, lymphocyte, plasma, eosinophil, neutrophil or connective tissue. We use the Eff-UNet to predict two maps. The first map is a segmentation and classification map which has seven channels. Each channel has the same spatial size with input images. One of seven channels represents the background and each of the rest channels represents segmentation of each nucleus. The second map is a direction map. The encoding method to make the direction map was proposed by Uhrig et al. [5]. For each pixel in a foreground object, its relative angle towards the centroid of the object is calculated, and quantized into $N$ different classes. An example of the direction map is shown in Fig. 2. The direction map has $N$ channels and the background channel in the segmentation map is used as the background for the direction map. The number of output channels of Eff-UNet is $7 + N$ in total.

This report describes our method submitted to the CoNIC challenge. Our method employs a multi-task learning framework, which performs a panoptic segmentation task and a regression task. For the panoptic segmentation task, we use an encoder-decoder type deep neural network. In the segmentation task, we introduce a direction map to separate neighboring nuclei into different instances. The predicted direction map is used in the postprocessing stage. For the regression task, we utilize the latent space representation obtained from the encoder of the segmentation network.

II. PROPOSED METHOD

A. Network Architecture

Our method employs a multi-task learning framework, which performs a panoptic segmentation task (Task 1) and a regression task (Task 2). Figure 1 shows an overview of the network structure of our proposed method.

For the panoptic segmentation task, we use Eff-UNet [2] which combines the effectiveness of compound scaled EfficientNet [3] as the encoder for feature extraction with U-Net decoder [4] for reconstructing the fine-grained segmentation map. Note that the last stage of EfficientNet is omitted. In Task 1, we have to segment nuclei within the tissue, while also classifying each nucleus into one of the following six categories: epithelial, lymphocyte, plasma, eosinophil, neutrophil or connective tissue. We use the Eff-UNet to predict two maps. The first map is a segmentation and classification map which has seven channels. Each channel has the same spatial size with input images. One of seven channels represents the background and each of the rest channels represents segmentation of each nucleus. The second map is a direction map. The encoding method to make the direction map was proposed by Uhrig et al. [5]. For each pixel in a foreground object, its relative angle towards the centroid of the object is calculated, and quantized into $N$ different classes. An example of the direction map is shown in Fig. 2. The direction map has $N$ channels and the background channel in the segmentation and classification map is used as the background for the direction map. The number of output channels of Eff-UNet is $7 + N$ in total.

Fig. 1. Network structure of our proposed method.
For the regression task (Task 2), we utilize the latent space representation (feature vectors) obtained from the encoder of the segmentation and classification network. The feature vectors are fed into a network, which is the same as the last stage in EfficientNet, and then fed into a single linear layer. The number of output channels is six and each channel predicts the number of nuclei for each category.

B. Training Procedure

As the encoder of Eff-UNet, we use EfficientNet-B7 and it is pretrained with the ImageNet dataset [6]. The number of directions for the direction map, $N$, is 4.

As for the preprocessing, the images are augmented. We use shift (maximum shift size is 10% of the image size), scaling (0.9 – 1.1 times), rotation (-5 – +5 degrees), color jitter (0.8 – 1.2 times for brightness, contrast, saturation and hue) and Gaussian blur (the max value of the sigma is 1.0) for the augmentation. The images are then normalized.

The loss function consists of four terms. The first term is the cross entropy loss for each pixel in the segmentation and classification map. The second term is the Dice loss. The weights for four terms are 1.0, 4.0, 2.0 and 0.005, respectively.

The datasets are constructed as follows. We use 80% of the images for training and 20% of the images for validation. The number of images in training and validation datasets are 3,983 and 998, respectively.

The number of nuclei for each category obtained by the network is a real value. If the value is negative, it is thresholded to 0. Otherwise, it is rounded to a nearest integer value.

III. Experimental Results

The organizers of the CoNIC challenge prepare the preliminary test site to evaluate the performance for each task. As for the evaluation metrics for Task 1, multi-class panoptic quality ($mPQ$) is used to determine the performance of nuclear instance segmentation and classification. $PQ$ is calculated with Detection Quality ($DQ$), which is calculated with numbers of TP, FP and FN, and Segmentation Quality ($SQ$), which is calculated with IoU and number of TP. For Task 2, multi-class coefficient of determination $R^2$ to determine the correlation between the predicted and true counts is used. For more details, please refer to the challenge site [1].

The results of the preliminary test of our proposed method were that $mPQ$ was 0.309 and $R^2$ was 0.344.

REFERENCES

[1] [Online]. Available: https://conic-challenge.grand-challenge.org/
[2] B. Baheti, S. Innani, S. Gajre, and S. Talbar, “Eff-unet: A novel architecture for semantic segmentation in unstructured environment,” in Proceedings of the IEEE/CVF Conference on Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition Workshops, 2020, pp. 358–359.
[3] M. Tan and Q. Le, “Efficientnet: Rethinking model scaling for convolutional neural networks,” in International conference on machine learning, PMLR, 2019, pp. 6105–6114.
[4] O. Ronneberger, P. Fischer, and T. Brox, “U-net: Convolutional networks for biomedical image segmentation,” in International Conference on Medical image computing and computer-assisted intervention. Springer, 2015, pp. 234–241.
[5] J. Uhrig, M. Cordts, U. Franke, and T. Brox, “Pixel-level encoding and depth layering for instance-level semantic labeling,” in German Conference on Pattern Recognition. Springer, 2016, pp. 14–25.
[6] O. Russakovsky, J. Deng, H. Su, J. Krause, S. Satheesh, S. Ma, Z. Huang, A. Karpathy, A. Khosla, M. Bernstein et al., “Imagenet large scale visual recognition challenge,” International journal of computer vision, vol. 115, no. 3, pp. 211–252, 2015.
[7] D. P. Kingma and J. Ba, “Adam: A method for stochastic optimization,” in Proc. of the 3rd International Conference for Learning Representations (ICLR), 2015.