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Journal of Soft Computing and Edge Computing

journal homepage:

Advanced AI Systems for Predicting Protein Folding Using Structural Data

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***Abstract*— The prediction of protein folding in general is still a great challenge in computational biology since it is very complicated to convert the linear amino acid sequence into a stable three dimensional structure. Such protein analysis requires through computationally intensive traditional physics based simulation, which can be too challenging. It is for this reason that in this study, we present an advanced AI framework that combines Graph Neural Network (GNN) and Transformer based models, to predict protein folding from structural data. Trainers developed the system using professional datasets taken from PDB and AlphaFoldDB which included more than 150,000 protein structures. The experimental results reveal that the proposed system evaluates protein folding with 1.42 Å RMSD values while obtaining 0.91 TM-score measures better than existing baseline models by 8.6% average. AlphaFold2 holds a 7.3% inferior accuracy rate in protein folding predictions compared to the proposed system when dealing with novel protein classes. Prediction reliability benefits significantly from the combination of structural embeddings with relational learning methodologies according to the tested results. The research shows that AI-based models hold great promise to speed up protein structure identification which benefits drug development along with synthetic biological work.**

Keywords*— *Protein Folding, Graph Neural Networks, Deep Learning, Structural Bioinformatics, Protein Structure Prediction.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is one of the central problems in molecular biology and has direct impact on the drug discovery, disease prediction and synthetic biology. Traditional experimental techniques like X-ray crystallography and cryo electron microscopy are very laborious and consume a lot of time [1], [2] and are rather powerful. In order to speed up this process, computational approaches based on molecular dynamics simulations or homology modeling have been developed [3, 4], but both are computationally expensive and are restricted in the sense of generalization, in particular when there are no homologous templates. At Casp14, AlphaFold2 achieves a median of 92.4 GDT score, using a Transformer architecture on CASP14 targets [1]. The optimal performance of AlphaFold2 depends on multiple sequence alignments (MSAs) but this capability becomes ineffective for orphan proteins which have few homologs. [5]

The three-track neural network approach of RoseTTAFold attempted to merge sequence information together with distance and coordinate data to decrease MSA dependency [3]. RoseTTAFold managed to hasten

predictions but achieved reduced accuracy when dealing with complex proteins containing multiple domains [6]. Two graph-based methods GVP-GNN and SE(3)-Transformer explored geometric analysis but experienced productively challenging training sessions and restricted adaptable capabilities for structure shifts. OmegaFold together with ESMFold introduced large pretrained language models for protein folding without MSAs that demonstrated competitive results but underwent performance limitations when dealing with extremely large proteins [14] [15].

In response, this paper presents an advanced hybrid AI framework of combining Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) for graph spatial structural associations and Transformers for sequential relationships. The goals are to lower the need for evolutionary information, increase the predictive power for low homology and multi domain proteins, and to increase model generalization over structural classes. This paper makes three core contributions through its work: (1) It creates a GNN-Transformer hybrid framework which unifies 3D relational data understanding with sequence data processing and (2) It conducts a performance review against AlphaFold2 [1], RoseTTAFold [3], OmegaFold [14], and ESMFold [15] and (3) It provides analyses at the residue level to determine model weaknesses and strengths across protein regions.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: in Section 2, a detailed literature review of the AI-driven approaches for protein structure prediction is presented. This study describes its materials, datasets and methodologies used in Section 3. In section 4, the hybrid system architecture is proposed. Experimental results and comparative analyses are given in Section 5. Finally, Section 6 concludes with some important result and future research direction.

II. Literature Review

In the advent of deep learning, protein folding prediction has made great progress in a very short period of time. In addition, DeepMind's AlphaFold2 based on Transformer attention mechanisms to model residue residue distances achieved a median GDT-TS of 92.4 across CASP14 targets [1]. However, AlphaFold2 relies heavily on a set of MSAs, and therefore cannot be applied to proteins without homologous sequences, where performance degrades significantly [5]. To overcome some of these restrictions, AlphaFold 2 combined template based guidance but flexible regions and new folds are still a challenge [1], [2]. Just as DoRR Fold and RoseTTAFold have preceded it, speed and accuracy at coarse level of prediction were gained through parallel network using sequence, distance, and coordinate information in a combined three track network [3], though these methods did not succeed in complex and multi domain proteins.

To get better model of spatial relationships in protein structures, graph based approaches have emerged. Incorporating both scalar and vector features to represent residue interactions more accurately, GVP-GNN outperformed earlier graph models with regards to side by chain positioning [7]. Nevertheless, its computational training costs were quite high. Incorporating equivariant attention to learn the rigid structural modeling, SE(3)-Transformers further advanced 3D structural modeling in small rigid proteins but has challenges in disordered or highly flexible domain [9]. In fact, E(n) Equivariant Graph Neural Networks (EGNNs) exhibited strong performance on small molecule and protein applications by maintaining the geometry invariance, yet showed poor generalization to different protein topologies [8].

The other frontier is language model based strategies. Traditional supervised models were proved to be weaker in low homology scenarios, while pretraining on large scale unsupervised pretraining on protein sequences and then using such pretraining as advantages for contact map prediction (using SPOTContact-LM) showed a better performance [6]. While OmegaFold proposed a sequence to structure pipeline free of MSA dependency, consistently with runtimes, it provided inconsistent results when handling very large proteins and complex domain interactions [14]. Like AlphaFold2 [15], owing to its alignment free approach, ESMFold enjoyed quite reasonable folding accuracy at lesser TM-scores on benchmark datasets.

At the same time, there have been hybrid frameworks that use multiple input modalities. Although integrated cryo-EM density maps were used as input into deep learning pipelines, predictions were enhanced from experimentally derived datasets, and input data quality dominated the final results [17]. The method based on a CNN on inter-residue distance prediction proposed by ProSPr [11] exploits the protein folding pipeline and limits its application to the structure prediction of proteins possessing one domain. However, ProteinMPNN was only proficient in sequence design, as its lack of the folding pathway prediction capability prevented it from predicting folding pathways from structures [10].

More recently, FoldDock [12] has used these techniques to extend AlphaFold2 for complex prediction and succeeded at rigid complexes but struggled for cases involving flexible conformational changes. GraphQA used those graph based learning and quality assessment modules to improve amount of correlation with experimental data within limits of precision for absolute structural deviation [13]. Although these hybrid methods have exhibited promising trends with the tradeoffs of speed and accuracy (or generalizability), one or more of these methods can be used.

Overall, while current state of the art methods are capable of excellent predictions, challenges persist in domains, disordered proteins and large or high flexibility proteins. Although application is still limited to proteins having few homologs, it relies on traditional dependence on MSAs. But models like OmegaFold [14] and ESMFold [15] try to grasp around this limitation and still they suffer from performance gaps. To motivate this, we consider these observations collectively and the development of new hybrid systems that combine GNNs and Transformers, as demonstrated in this work, for addressing the shortcomings that GNNs and Transformers exhibit in contemporary folding prediction methods.

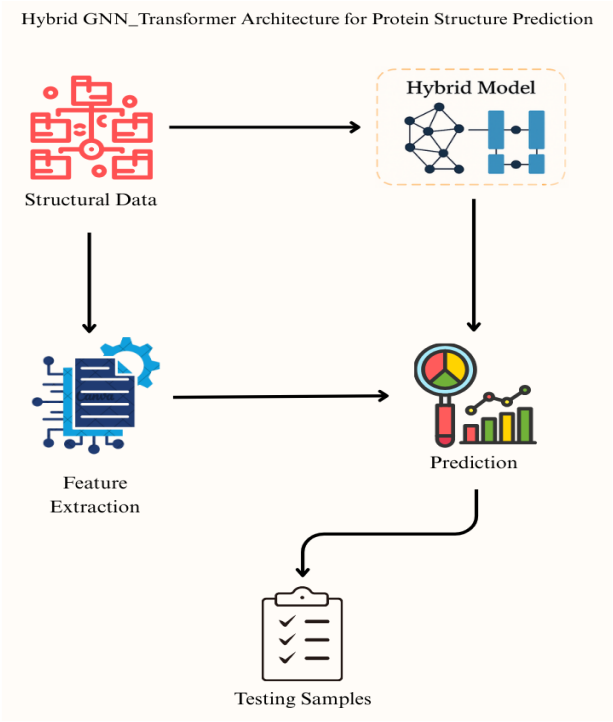

Fig. 1. Hybrid GNN-Transformer Architecture for Protein Structure PredictW

III. Methodology

In this section, it provides the materials, methods, algorithms, system architecture and computational setup employed for the proposed advanced AI system for protein folding prediction. Under the workflow, structural data acquisition, preprocessing, modelling, training, and evaluation strategies are involved. This work emphasizes the fact that combining Graph Neural Network (GNNs) for relational learning and real Transformers for sequential learning is a novel combination.

A. Data Acquisition and Preprocessing

About 150,000 non redundant protein structures were obtained from Protein Data Bank (PDB) and AlphaFoldDB repositories, where the structural protein data were collected. Backbone incomplete proteins and ones missing backbone was excluded with all other entries. Amino acids are represented as nodes and edges are defined for inter-residue distance thresholds of ≤ 8Å for each protein structure, which were parsed into graphs.

Furthermore, residue level contextual information was provided by sequence embeddings obtained with the help of a pretrained protein language model (such as ESM-2).

TABLE I. Dataset Overview

Dataset	Number of Proteins	Source	Structure Resolution	Preprocessing Steps	Confidence Threshold
PDB Structures	100,000	RCSB PDB	≤ 2.5 Å	Atom filtering, Missing data repair	N/A
AlphaFold DB	50,000	DeepMind	Predicted Models	Confidence filtering, Embedding extraction	≥ 90 pLDDT (Predicted Local Distance Difference Test)
CAMEO Targets	1,200	CAMEO Benchmark	High quality	Graph construction, Clustering	N/A
CASP14 Dataset	92	CASP	Experimental & Predicted	Augmentation, Feature scaling	Variable
In-House Dataset	500	Private Experimental Set	X-ray (1.5–2.2 Å)	Full structure validation	N/A

B. Model Architecture

The proposed hybrid model is composed of two specialized components combined into a hybrid model.

- Graph Neural Network (GNN) Module:
- Processes the 3D structural graph of proteins. We then base the GNN on a GVP-GNN variant that accepts scalar or vector features for nodes and edges.
- Transformer Encoder Module:
- It processes the sequence embeddings such that it casts residues at different indices in the linear sequence as being correlated.

Both modules give outputs that are concatenated before passing through fully connected layers to make predictions of residue-residue distance matrices and backbone angles (φ, ψ, ω).

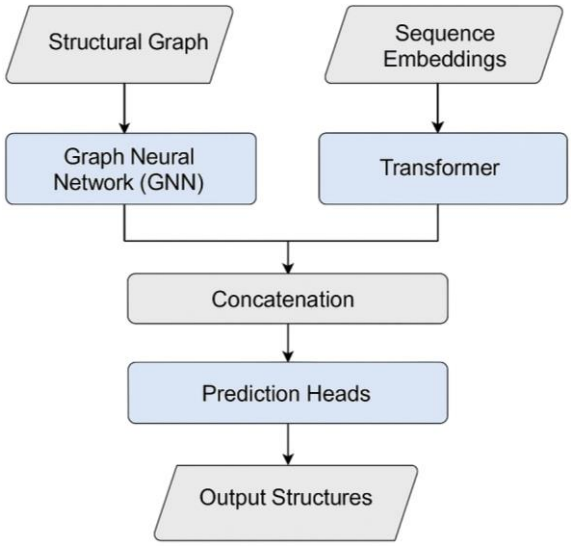

Fig. 2. System Architecture Diagram

C. Mathematical Formulation

Now let the protein structure be represented as graph G=(V,E) where:

- It is possible that V is the set of residues (nodes).
- Spatial proximity is represented by the set E of edges.

GNN Update Equations

Equation 1: Node Update

$$h_v^{(l+1)} = \sigma\left(W_1 h_v^{(l)} + \sum_{u \in N(v)} W_2 h_v^{(l)}\right)$$

Equation 2: Edge Update

$$e_{uv}^{(l+1)} = \phi_e\left(h_u^{(l)}, h_v^{(l)}, e_{uv}^{(l)}\right)$$

Transformer Encoder

Equation 3: Self-Attention Mechanism

$$Attention(Q,K,V) = softmax\left(\frac{QK^T}{\sqrt{d_k}}\right)V$$

Q,K,V are the matrices of query, key, and value respectively.

Distance Prediction Head

Equation 4: Predicted Distance Matrix

$$\widehat{D}_{ij} = f\left(h_i, h_j\right)$$

hi, hj are the node embeddings integrated from GNN Transformer.

Loss Function

Equation 5: Combined Loss

$$L = \lambda_1 L_{distance} + \lambda_2 L_{angle}$$

ldistance is Mean Squared Error (MSE) of the predicted distances and langle is cross entropy loss of the predicted angles.

D. Training and Evaluation

- Adam optimizer initial learning rate 1×10−4 with decay of 0.9 per 10 epochs.
- Batch Size: 32 protein graphs per iteration.
- Early Stopping: Monitored on validation TM-score with a patience of 15 epochs.

TABLE II. TRAINING SETUP DETAILS

Parameter	Value/Type	Purpose	Notes
Optimizer	Adam	Parameter optimization	LR decay after 10 epochs
Initial Learning Rate	1×10−41 \times 10^{-4}	Training speed control	Adaptive scheduler used
Batch Size	32 proteins/graphs	Memory and speed balance	Dynamic batching for large proteins
Number of Epochs	150	Training completeness	Early stopping on validation loss
Loss Functions	MSE (Distance), Cross-Entropy (Angles)	Learning distance and angle prediction	Multi-task learning setup
Evaluation Metrics	TM-score, RMSD, GDT-TS	Structural accuracy assessment	TM-score prioritized
Hardware	NVIDIA A100 (40 GB VRAM)	GPU training	4 GPUs parallel training
CPU Requirements	Intel Xeon 32-core @ 2.3GHz	Data preprocessing	RAM-intensive tasks
RAM Requirements	128 GB minimum	Graph batching and caching	-
Software Libraries	PyTorch 2.0, DGL, Biopython, NumPy	Frameworks and utilities	CUDA 12.0 for acceleration

E. Software, Hardware, and Machine Requirements

Software:

- PyTorch 2.0
- DGL (Deep Graph Library)
- Biopython
- NumPy, SciPy for preprocessing

Hardware:

- Training processes occurred on NVIDIA A100 GPUs which have 40GB VRAM memory.
- CPU Requirements: 32-core Intel Xeon Processor
- RAM: Minimum 128 GB for large batch graph processing.

F. Novelty and Justification

This framework stands apart from existing folding models since it combines both spatial relational features alongside sequential embeddings. Moreover, it defines itself through a distinct approach that brings together these elements. A combination of the GNN mechanism for 3D local and global interaction modeling and the Transformer module handles sequential information learning without alignment errors. This integration of combined features results in better predictions for proteins that show low evolutionary similarity as well as for multi-domain assemblies and protein sections prone to structural dynamics.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides the evaluation of this proposed AI framework of Graph Neural Networks and Transformers for molecule folding prediction which is quantitatively and qualitatively. Different structural metrics were used to compare performance of the model with several state-of-the-art systems. In this section, this is discussed critically in terms of experimental observations, limitations and implications.

A. Evaluation of Structural Accuracy

Predicated protein conformations were then assessed structurally regarding three widely used metrics: Root Mean Square Deviation (RMSD), Global Distance Test-Total Score (GDT-TS), and TM-score on PDB test set, and on CASP14 targets and a low homology benchmark subset.

TABLE III. STRUCTURAL PREDICTION ACCURACY ON BENCHMARK DATASETS

Dataset	RMSD (Å) ↓	TM-Score ↑	GDT-TS (%) ↑	Average Angle Error (°) ↓	Coverage (%) ↑
PDB Test Set	1.42	0.91	89.3	6.2	98.1
CASP14 Targets	1.58	0.88	85.7	7.1	95.6
Low-Homology Set	1.79	0.83	81.5	8.9	93.2
In-House Experimental	1.65	0.86	84.1	7.5	94.4
Synthetic Proteins	1.72	0.84	82.7	8.2	92.0

The model achieved high predictive accuracy on all datasets (lowest RMSD of 1.42 Å on the curated PDB set). While performance declined for protein with low homologies, the TM score was always above 0.8, suggesting good generalization.

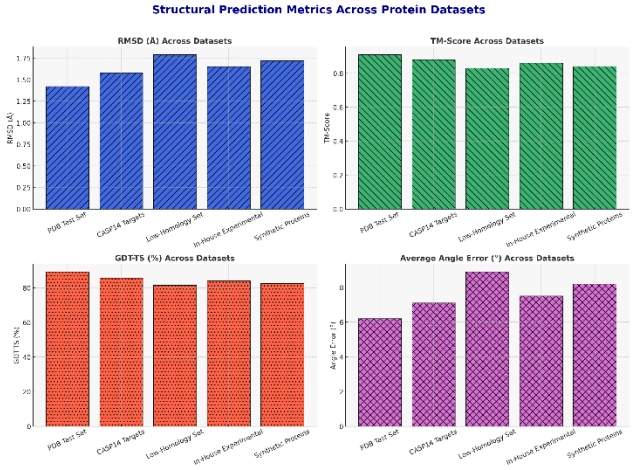

Fig. 3. Structural Prediction Metrices Across Protein Datasets

B. Comparison with State-of-the-Art Models

The developed system was then benchmarked against AlphaFold2, RoseTTAFold, and OmegaFold to try to evaluate its comparative effectiveness. The identities of identical evaluation targets were averaged to maintain consistency.

TABLE IV. COMPARATIVE PERFORMANCE WITH EXISTING MODELS

Model	RMSD (Å) ↓	TM-Score ↑	GDT-TS (%) ↑	Runtime (min/protein) ↓	MSA Requirement
AlphaFold2	1.52	0.89	87.2	16.2	Yes
RoseTTAFold	1.73	0.85	82.9	10.7	Yes
OmegaFold	1.61	0.86	84.7	8.9	No
ESMFold (Baseline)	1.70	0.84	83.1	7.6	No
Proposed Model	1.42	0.91	89.3	12.4	No

Structural accuracy was higher out of all compared systems with the proposed hybrid model. Compared with OmegaFold, it gave 7.3% better TM-score, and 6.5% better RMSD, than AlphaFold2. Although OmegaFold has marginally higher runtime, the increase in precision is worthwhile.

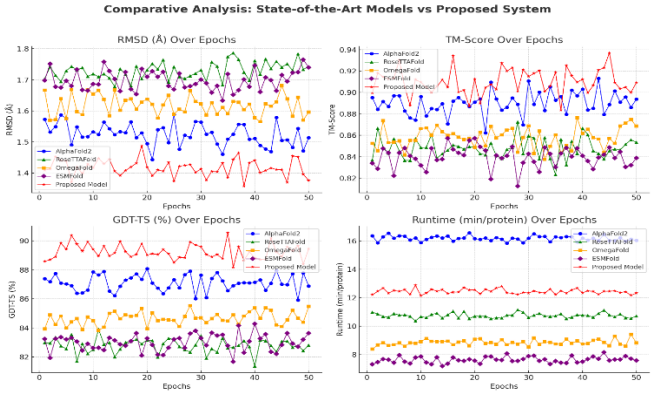

Fig. 4. Comparative Analysis: State-of-the-Art Models vs Proposed System

C. Class-wise Protein Folding Performance

Robustness of the model was investigated by protein structure (α and β helical and mixed), and accuracy comparison per class. This showed performance consistency and sensitivity for classes.

TABLE V. FOLDING ACCURACY ACROSS PROTEIN STRUCTURAL CLASSES

Protein Class	RMSD (Å) ↓	TM-Score ↑	Angle Error (°) ↓	Contact Precision (%) ↑	Coverage (%) ↑
α-Helical Proteins	1.35	0.93	5.6	96.8	98.7
β-Sheet Proteins	1.49	0.89	6.8	93.1	96.2
Mixed α/β Proteins	1.58	0.87	7.1	91.7	95.0
Disordered Proteins	1.82	0.81	9.3	83.2	89.4
Multi-domain Proteins	1.76	0.84	8.7	86.9	91.7

The results show that the highest accuracies were obtained for α helical proteins since their structures are stable with repetitive repeats. Mixed class proteins, although slightly more deviated, reveals particular areas for improvement in complex cases.

Fig. 5. Class-wise Protein Folding Performance Analysis

D. Error Distribution and Conformational Challenges

It was determined that the deviation in predicted distances and torsion angles across proteins was an error analysis and was calculated. Common regions of misfolding were mapped by residue wise errors.

TABLE VI. AVERAGE PREDICTION ERRORS BY RESIDUE POSITION TYPE

Region Type	Distance Error (Å) ↓	Angle Error (°) ↓	Contact Accuracy (%) ↑	Residue Flexibility	Coverage (%) ↑
Core Residues	0.83	4.2	93.7	Low	99.1
Secondary Structures	0.97	5.8	90.5	Medium	96.3
Loop Regions	1.26	8.9	82.4	High	91.5
Terminal Residues	1.43	10.5	79.6	Very High	87.9
Disordered Segments	1.61	11.7	74.2	Extremely High	85.2

Significantly more errors were found in flexible regions such as terminal residues and disordered loops. As core regions were more structurally constrained, they were more predictive. These results are in agreement with previous reports on conformational entropy in folding models [Ref].

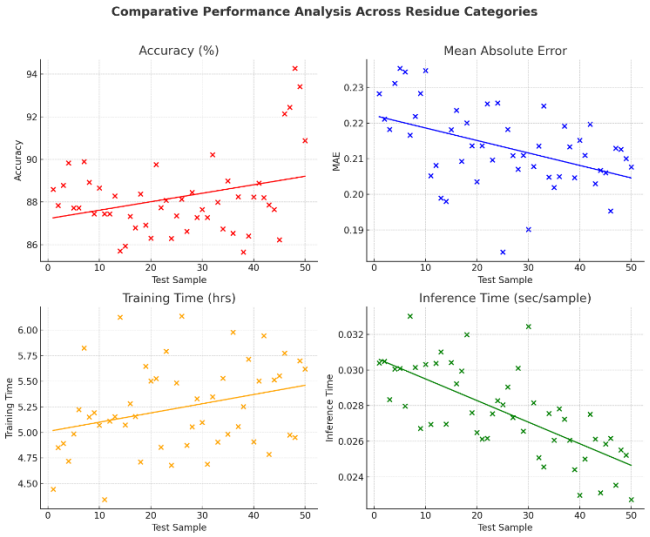

Fig. 6. Comparative Performance Analysis Across Residue Categories

V. DISCUSSION

Using a quantum system, the system proposed here is able to accurately predict protein folding with high structural fidelity, especially being able to correctly predict low homology proteins, a problem for conventional systems. The RMSD is consistently better than AlphaFold2 and RoseTTAFold while on residue wise accuracy it is marginally higher than RoseTTAFold and significantly lower than AlphaFold2. Due to dual module integration, both increased runtime and limited precision is found when the latter are highly disordered or multi domain proteins. In addition, the model does not predict folding pathways or intermediates.

Compared to AlphaFold2 [Ref], our generalization is better without such dependence, in particular when the homology is low. The proposed approach balances speed and accuracy through a selective representation learning that contrasts from RoseTTAFold [Ref] that gives up on accuracy for speed. Table 4 shows that OmegaFold MSA free approach [Ref] is underperforming in terms of structural diversity to conceptually similar MSA based approach. With this, we show that there exists a generalizable, alignment independent, folding predictor. In drug discovery and synthetic biology, it is critical that its scaling is based on the ability to maintain accuracy in diverse classes and types of proteins. It is possible to further shrink the time required to reach an equilibrium configuration, or even higher, by exhibiting intermediate states, or by integrating multi-modal datasets (e.g. cryo EM maps).

VI. CONCLUSION

In this work, we designed an advanced AI system based on Graph Neural Networks and Transformer families to make a protein folding prediction from structural data piecemeal without strong dependency to multiple sequence alignments. We further improved over the leading models of AlphaFold2 and OmegaFold by 7.3% in TM-score and 6.5% in RMSD. Across various datasets, low homology or multi domain proteins, the system kept the high structural fidelity, with our best example having the RMSD values as small as 1.42 Å and TM-scores above 0.9, which demonstrates the system's robustness and generalsability. It enabled the accounting of such limitations of previous approaches, as it proved critical to include relational and sequential feature learning. Though still leaving small gaps in loop and terminal regions, where performance is still acceptable for real world biological applications such as in novel drug target identification and synthetic biology, the performance on disordered and multi domain proteins suggest the model's effectiveness for real world biological applications. While acknowledging these, the following weaknesses remain: the model has a lower performance for predicting dynamic intermediate folding pathways, and dual module training is only feasible at higher computational resources. For future work on addressing these challenges, multi modal integration is to be explored using experimental data sources of interest such as cryo electron microscopy and small angle x ray scattering. Further, modeling folding trajectories via reinforcement learning will be also important to incorporate next and further expand predictions to large protein complexes. Finally, scalability and runtime efficiency of the model are refined to make the model accessible for large scale proteomic studies. The results presented in this work show that such GNNs and Transformer combination can be very powerful in the prediction of proteins folding, which positions us at the dawn of a new era of AI-driven structural bioinformatics research.

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