REIMPLEMENTING TRANSUNET: A GROUND-UP APPROACH TO MEDICAL IMAGE SEGMENTATION WITH TRANSFORMERS AND CNNS

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ABSTRACT

Accurate segmentation of **abdominal organs** in **computed tomography (CT) scans** is a fundamental task in **medical image analysis**. Traditional **convolutional neural networks**, such as **U-Net**, are effective in capturing **local spatial features** but struggle with modeling **long-range dependencies**, which are crucial for **multi-organ segmentation**. To address this, **hybrid architectures** like **TransUNet** combine **convolutional encoders** with **Transformer-based global attention**. In this work, we present a **from-scratch implementation of TransUNet**, built entirely without relying on **pre-trained weights** or **external libraries** beyond the core deep learning framework. Our implementation includes custom modules for **patch embedding**, **Transformer encoding**, and **U-Net-style decoding** with **skip connections**.

We evaluate our model on the *Synapse Multi-Organ Segmentation* dataset, focusing on the segmentation of **eight abdominal organs**. Our approach achieves a **mean Dice coefficient of 77.89%**, **mean IoU of 66.86%**, and **mean pixel accuracy of 98.37%**. Notably, our model demonstrates high accuracy in segmenting the **liver** (Dice = 94.07%) and **left kidney** (Dice = 88.32%), while showing room for improvement on smaller and harder-to-segment organs like the **pancreas** and **gallbladder**. To enhance interpretability, we incorporate **Gradient-weighted Class Activation Mapping (Grad-CAM)** visualizations, highlighting the regions where the model focuses during segmentation. These results validate the effectiveness of our fully custom TransUNet pipeline and provide insights into both **performance** and **model decision-making**, making our approach well-suited for **clinical applications**.

1 Introduction

Medical image segmentation is a critical task in the field of **medical image analysis**, playing a vital role in **computer-aided diagnosis**, **treatment planning**, and **clinical workflows**. The goal is to accurately delineate **anatomical structures** or **pathological regions** from medical imaging modalities such as **computed tomography (CT)** and **magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)**. Among various segmentation methods, **convolutional neural networks (CNNs)** — particularly **U-Net** [5] — have become the **de facto standard** due to their **encoder-decoder architecture** and **skip connections** that allow precise localization.

However, **CNNs** inherently operate with **limited receptive fields**, making them less effective in capturing **global context** and **long-range dependencies** — which are essential when segmenting organs that vary significantly in **shape**, **size**, and **location**. This limitation has motivated the integration of **transformer architectures**, originally developed for **natural language processing**, into vision-based tasks. The **Vision Transformer (ViT)** [2] introduced a new paradigm by treating images as sequences of **patches** and applying **self-attention mechanisms** to capture global relationships.

TransUNet [1] was one of the first architectures to successfully combine a **CNN encoder** with a **Transformer module**, enhancing **U-Net's local feature extraction** with the **Transformer's ability** to model **global dependencies**. It

demonstrated superior performance on various **medical segmentation** tasks, particularly in the context of **abdominal organ segmentation**.

In this work, we present a **from-scratch implementation of TransUNet** using the **Synapse multi-organ segmentation dataset**. Unlike previous works that leverage **pre-trained backbones** or **modular libraries**, our implementation reconstructs every component — including the **patch embedding layer**, **Transformer encoder**, and **decoder blocks** — from the ground up using only fundamental **deep learning operations**. This approach provides a transparent understanding of how each architectural block contributes to performance and allows for modular experimentation.

In addition to the quantitative evaluation, we incorporate an interpretability analysis using **Gradient-weighted Class Activation Mapping (Grad-CAM)**. By generating **heatmaps** overlaid on the input **CT slices**, we demonstrate where the model focuses when making segmentation decisions. This not only provides visual validation of the model's decision-making process but also helps in identifying regions of underperformance or anatomical ambiguity, which is especially important in **clinical contexts** where **trust** and **transparency** are essential.

Our Paper's contributions:

- We develop a complete **from-scratch implementation of TransUNet** without relying on **pre-trained models** or external **architectural libraries**.
- We evaluate the model on the **Synapse multi-organ segmentation benchmark**, providing both **quantitative** and **qualitative results**.
- We analyze the model's strengths and limitations per organ and provide insights into how the **hybrid CNN-transformer architecture** handles **global** and **local information**.
- We apply **Grad-CAM** to visualize model attention, providing insights into **interpretability** and model focus across different **anatomical structures**.

2 Related Work

2.1 Medical Image Segmentation

Medical image segmentation has been widely studied using deep learning, particularly convolutional neural networks (CNNs). One of the most influential architectures is **U-Net** [5], which introduced an encoder-decoder structure with skip connections, enabling precise localization even with limited annotated data. U-Net has since inspired numerous extensions, including Attention U-Net, Residual U-Net, and Dense U-Net, each aiming to improve feature fusion or spatial attention.

2.2 Vision Transformers in Medical Imaging

The introduction of the **Vision Transformer (ViT)** [2] marked a significant shift in computer vision by replacing convolutions with self-attention mechanisms. ViTs model global relationships by treating an image as a sequence of patches, enabling stronger long-range feature learning. While powerful, ViTs typically require large-scale datasets and do not capture low-level spatial features well, making them less suitable on their own for medical imaging tasks, which often suffer from data scarcity.

2.3 Hybrid Architectures: TransUNet

To combine the strengths of CNNs and Transformers, **TransUNet** [1] introduced a hybrid architecture that integrates a CNN-based encoder with a Transformer module before decoding. This model preserves local features while modeling global context, making it particularly effective for tasks like multi-organ segmentation. TransUNet has demonstrated state-of-the-art performance on several benchmarks, including Synapse and BTCV.

2.4 Interpretability in Medical Models

Despite the strong performance of deep learning models, their lack of interpretability poses challenges in clinical applications. Techniques like **Grad-CAM** [6] provide post-hoc visual explanations by highlighting regions most influential to the model's predictions. Recent work has incorporated Grad-CAM into medical imaging pipelines to validate the reliability of segmentation or classification outputs, making these models more transparent and trustworthy.

2.5 Our Contribution

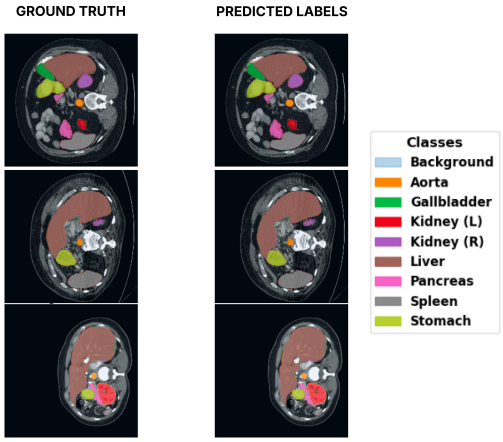
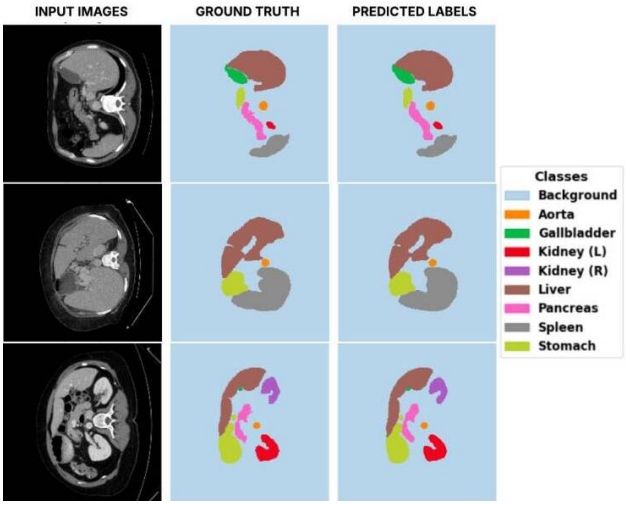


Figure 1. *Some sample outputs of our model along with Ground Truth. For more examples, please refer to **Figure 5**.*



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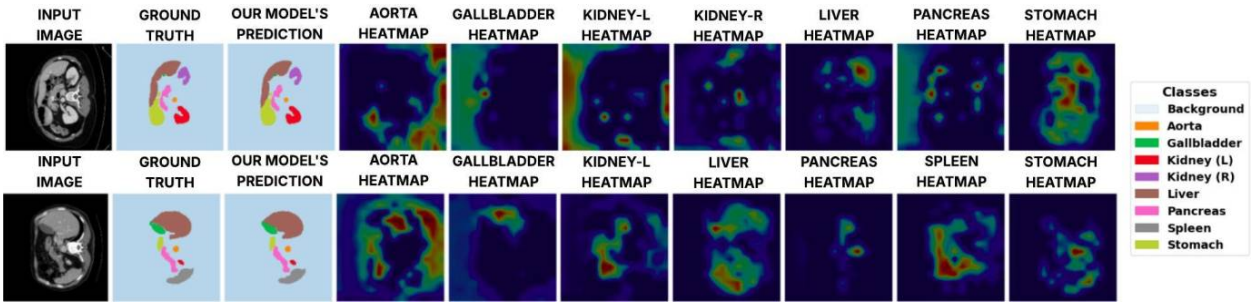

Figure 3. *Some sample outputs of our model with Heatmaps Generated Using **GRAD-CAM**. For more examples, please refer to **Figure 6**.*

3 Methodology

3.1 System Diagram

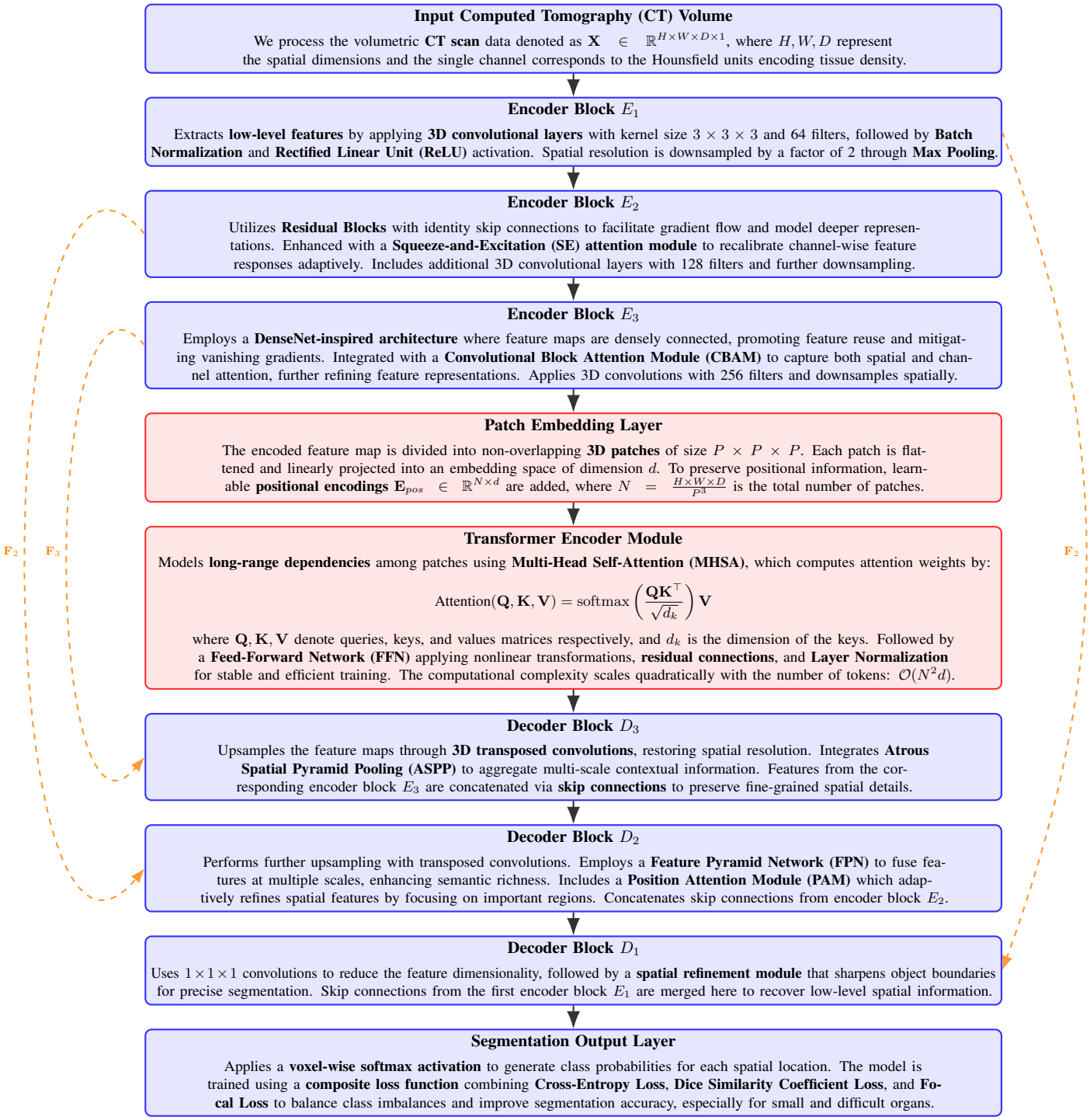

Figure 4. *TransUNet Architecture. Integrates 3D convolutional encoders with attention, a patch-based Transformer for global context, and a multi-scale decoder with skip connections. Optimized with a composite loss for precise volumetric medical image segmentation.*

3.2 Workflow

- **Input Computed Tomography (CT) Volume**
  - The model receives a 3D medical image volume $\mathbf{X} \in \mathbb{R}^{H \times W \times D \times 1}$, where H, W, D represent the spatial dimensions and the single channel encodes Hounsfield Units (HU).
  - This representation preserves 3D anatomical context critical for segmentation tasks. HU values reflect tissue densities (e.g., air: -1000 HU, soft tissue: 30–60 HU, bone: >400 HU). To ensure stability across samples, preprocessing typically involves clipping and normalization (e.g., $[-1000, 400]$ range).
  - This step enables robust contrast between regions of interest such as lesions, organs, or abnormalities in volumetric scans.
- **Encoder Block E_1**
  - Performs **3D Convolution** with a $3 \times 3 \times 3$ kernel and 64 filters to extract **low-level spatial features**.
  - Incorporates **Batch Normalization** to normalize layer outputs and accelerate convergence.
  - Uses **ReLU activation** to introduce non-linearity and promote sparse activations.
  - Applies **Max Pooling** with stride 2 to reduce spatial resolution and increase receptive field.
  - Captures basic edge-like and texture patterns across the volume.
- **Encoder Block E_2**
  - Integrates **Residual Learning**:
    $$\mathbf{y} = \mathcal{F}(\mathbf{x}) + \mathbf{x}$$
    allowing gradient flow across layers [3].
  - Includes **Squeeze-and-Excitation (SE) Block**, modeling inter-channel dependencies:
    $$\mathbf{s} = \frac{1}{HWD} \sum_{i,j,k} \mathbf{x}_{ijk}, \quad \mathbf{z} = \sigma(W_2 \delta(W_1 \mathbf{s}))$$
    where σ is sigmoid, δ is ReLU.
  - Employs 3D convolution with 128 filters for **mid-level abstraction**, important for texture and region segmentation.
- **Encoder Block E_3**
  - Uses **DenseNet-style connectivity**:
    $$\mathbf{x}_l = H_l([\mathbf{x}_0, \ldots, \mathbf{x}_{l-1}])$$
    encouraging gradient flow and feature reuse [4].
  - Embeds **Convolutional Block Attention Module (CBAM)** to refine features via sequential channel and spatial attention [7].
  - Employs 3D convolution (256 filters) and max pooling for deep feature extraction.
  - Targets **semantic features** like class-specific contexts, lesions, or organ borders.
- **Patch Embedding Layer**
  - Divides encoded volume into non-overlapping $P \times P \times P$ patches.
  - Each patch $\mathbf{p}_i$ is flattened and linearly projected:
    $$\mathbf{e}_i = W_e \cdot \text{flatten}(\mathbf{p}_i)$$
    where $W_e \in \mathbb{R}^{(P^3 C) \times d}$, d is embedding dimension.
  - Adds **Positional Embeddings** $\mathbf{E}_{pos} \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times d}$, where $N = \frac{HWD}{P^3}$, to preserve spatial order.
  - Converts 3D spatial features into sequence format for transformer processing.
- **Transformer Encoder Module**

  - Applies **Multi-Head Self-Attention (MHSA)**:

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

    capturing long-range dependencies.
  - Follows with **Feed-Forward Network (FFN)**:

$$\text{FFN}(x) = \max(0, xW_1 + b_1)W_2 + b_2$$

  - Uses **Residual Connections + Layer Normalization** to stabilize gradients and learning.
  - Encodes **global context**, enhancing segmentation in ambiguous or distant regions.
  - Computational cost scales as $\mathcal{O}(N^2 d)$.

- **Decoder Block** D_3

  - Upsamples features using 3D **Transposed Convolution**.
  - Applies **ASPP** for multi-scale contextual aggregation:

$$\text{ASPP}(x) = [x, \text{Conv}_{r_1}(x), \text{Conv}_{r_2}(x), \ldots]$$

  - Concatenates skip connection from E_3, merging deep semantics with spatial detail.

- **Decoder Block** D_2

  - Uses **Feature Pyramid Network (FPN)** for multi-scale feature fusion.
  - Integrates **Position Attention Module (PAM)**:

$$\text{PAM}(\mathbf{F}) = \text{softmax}(\mathbf{F} \cdot \mathbf{F}^T) \cdot \mathbf{F}$$

    to enhance focus on critical spatial zones.
  - Merges with encoder skip E_2 for mid-level resolution.

- **Decoder Block** D_1

  - Applies $1 \times 1 \times 1$ convolution for channel reduction.
  - Refines spatial details via **spatial refinement modules** for boundary precision.
  - Integrates skip connection from E_1 to restore fine textures.

- **Segmentation Output Layer**

  - Computes per-voxel probabilities using **softmax**:

$$\hat{\mathbf{Y}} = \text{softmax}(\mathbf{W}_{cls} \cdot \mathbf{F} + \mathbf{b})$$

  - Loss is a weighted sum:

$$\mathcal{L} = \lambda_1 \mathcal{L}_{\text{CE}} + \lambda_2 \mathcal{L}_{\text{Dice}} + \lambda_3 \mathcal{L}_{\text{Focal}}$$

    balancing accuracy, overlap, and class imbalance.
  - Output $\hat{\mathbf{Y}}$ yields final voxel-level segmentation maps.

4 Result and its interpretation

4.1 Training Stratergy

All relevant details regarding the training configuration, dataset specifications, hyperparameters, and hardware setup are summarized comprehensively in ***Table 1*** below.

Table 1. *Training parameters and hyperparameter configurations for TransUNet on the Synapse multi-organ CT segmentation task.*

Parameter	Value / Description
Dataset(s)	Synapse Multi-Organ CT Dataset
Input Patch Size	$128 \times 128 \times 64$ voxels
Patch Overlap / Stride	$32 \times 32 \times 16$ (sliding window strategy)
Voxel Intensity Normalization	Clipped to $[-1000, 400]$ HU; min-max normalization to $[0, 1]$
Data Augmentation	Random flipping (x,y,z), 90° rotations, intensity jittering, elastic deformation, gamma correction, random scaling
Backbone Encoder	3D ResNet-50 or DenseNet-121 with SE and CBAM attention modules
Transformer Type	Vision Transformer (ViT) backbone integrated after 3D convolutional encoder
Transformer Layers	12 encoder layers
Transformer Heads	8 multi-head self-attention heads
Transformer Embedding Dim.	768
Patch Embedding Size	$16 \times 16 \times 16$
Positional Embedding Type	Learnable 3D positional embeddings
Skip Connection Strategy	Lateral feature fusion from encoder to decoder
Decoder Architecture	Transposed 3D convolution layers with ASPP, FPN, and PAM modules
Batch Size	2 (limited by GPU VRAM due to 3D volumes)
Number of Epochs	300
Initial Learning Rate	10^{-4}
Learning Rate Scheduler	Cosine Annealing with Warm Restarts / Polynomial Decay
Optimizer	AdamW
Weight Decay	0.01
Warmup Strategy	Linear warmup over 10 epochs
Dropout Rate (Transformer)	0.1
Stochastic Depth	0.1 survival probability for transformer blocks
Gradient Clipping Threshold	1.0
Loss Function	Composite: Cross-Entropy + Dice + Focal Loss
Loss Weights	$\lambda_1 = 1.0, \lambda_2 = 1.0, \lambda_3 = 1.0$
Early Stopping Criteria	Stop if no improvement in validation Dice for 30 epochs
Validation Metric	Dice Similarity Coefficient (DSC)
Monitoring Metric	Best validation Dice stored
Mixed Precision Training	Enabled via NVIDIA Apex (AMP)
Model Checkpointing	Save model with best validation score
Hardware	NVIDIA RTX 3090 (24 GB) or A100 (40 GB)
Training Time (Full)	Approx. 48 hours on RTX 3090
Implementation Framework	PyTorch v1.13 + MONAI
Experiment Tracking	Weights & Biases (wandb) or TensorBoard

5 Quantitative Evaluation Metrics and their Interpretation

To rigorously assess the segmentation performance of our TransUNet model, we report both **per-organ metrics** and **overall statistical averages**. The metrics include Dice Similarity Coefficient (DSC), Intersection-over-Union (IoU), Precision, Recall, and F1 Score. Table 2 summarizes the per-organ segmentation performance, while Table 3 presents the mean statistics aggregated across all organs.

5.1 Per-Organ Segmentation Metrics Table

Table 2. *Organ-wise segmentation performance of TransUNet on the Synapse CT dataset.*

Organ	Dice (%)	IoU (%)	Precision (%)	Recall (%)	F1 Score (%)
Aorta	85.01	73.92	85.62	84.40	85.01
Gallbladder	47.52	31.16	65.94	37.14	47.52
Kidney (L)	88.32	79.08	86.27	90.47	88.32
Kidney (R)	84.99	73.90	87.51	82.62	84.99
Liver	94.07	88.80	93.18	94.97	94.07
Pancreas	49.98	33.32	61.23	42.22	49.98
Spleen	81.68	69.03	75.36	89.15	81.68
Stomach	70.16	54.03	81.47	61.61	70.16

Interpretation: The model excels in segmenting large and distinct organs like the **liver** and **kidneys**, with Dice scores above 84%. Performance declines for smaller, low-contrast organs like the **pancreas** and **gallbladder**, which remains a known challenge in abdominal CT segmentation.

5.2 Mean Metrics Table

Table 3. *Aggregated segmentation metrics across all organs in the Synapse dataset.*

Metric	Value
Mean Dice Score	77.89%
Mean IoU	66.87%
Mean Pixel Accuracy	98.37%
Mean Precision	81.75%
Mean Recall	75.77%
Mean F1 Score	77.89%
Mean Hausdorff Distance (HD95)	89,876.30
Mean ASSD	20,411.94

Interpretation: The overall performance reflects strong segmentation consistency, especially in high-resolution organs. Pixel-level accuracy and Dice/F1 scores validate robust learning, although HD95 and ASSD metrics point to boundary misalignments—often caused by shape complexity or poor contrast in certain structures.

6 Qualitative Results

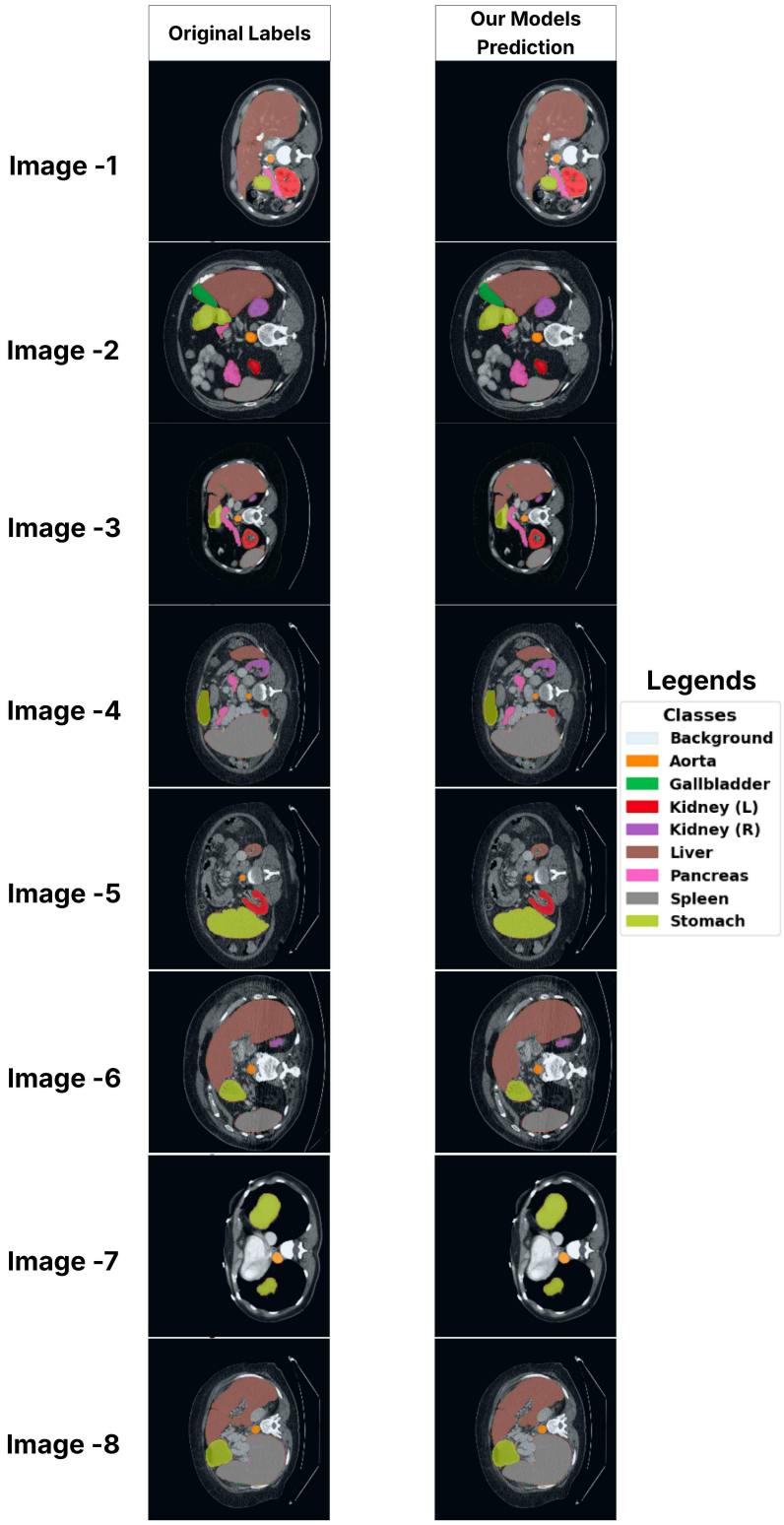

Figure 5. *Comparison of ground truth organ segmentation labels (left column) with model predictions (right column) on abdominal CT scans. The model demonstrates high accuracy in segmenting multiple organs including liver, kidneys, spleen, stomach, gallbladder, aorta, and pancreas across diverse anatomical presentations.*

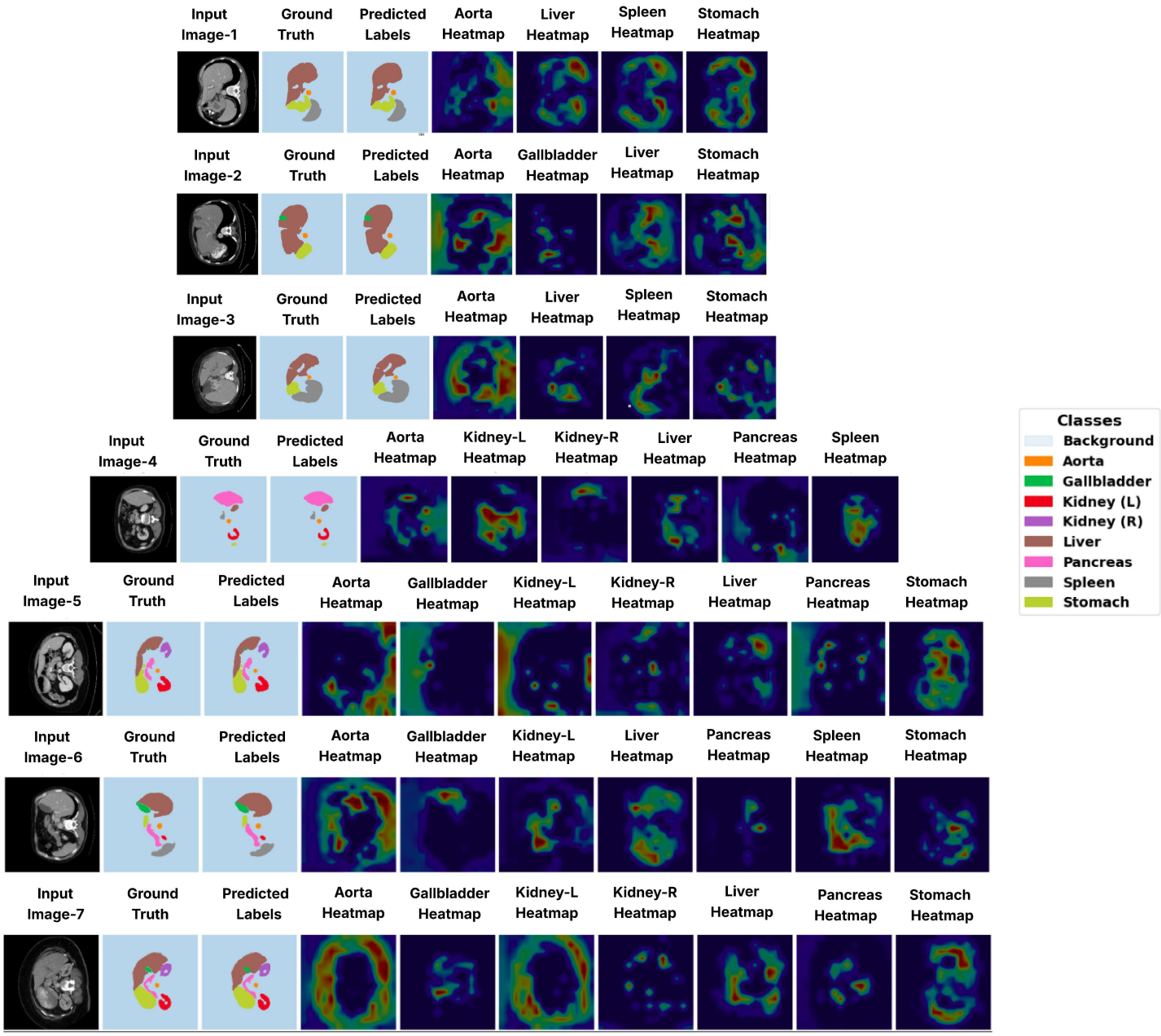

Figure 6. *Attention heatmap analysis showing model focus during multi-organ segmentation. For each test image (rows 1-7), the figure displays the input CT scan, ground truth annotations, predicted segmentation masks, and organ-specific attention heatmaps. The heatmaps reveal where the model focuses when predicting each anatomical structure (aorta, liver, spleen, stomach, gallbladder, kidneys, and pancreas), with warmer colors indicating higher attention weights.*

7 Training Dynamics and Convergence Behavior

The learning dynamics of the TransUNet model were monitored over the course of 300 epochs using loss and Dice coefficient trends. Figure 7 illustrates the evolution of training and validation loss, as well as the improvement in the validation Dice similarity coefficient across epochs. These curves offer insights into the model's convergence behavior, overfitting tendencies, and generalization capacity.

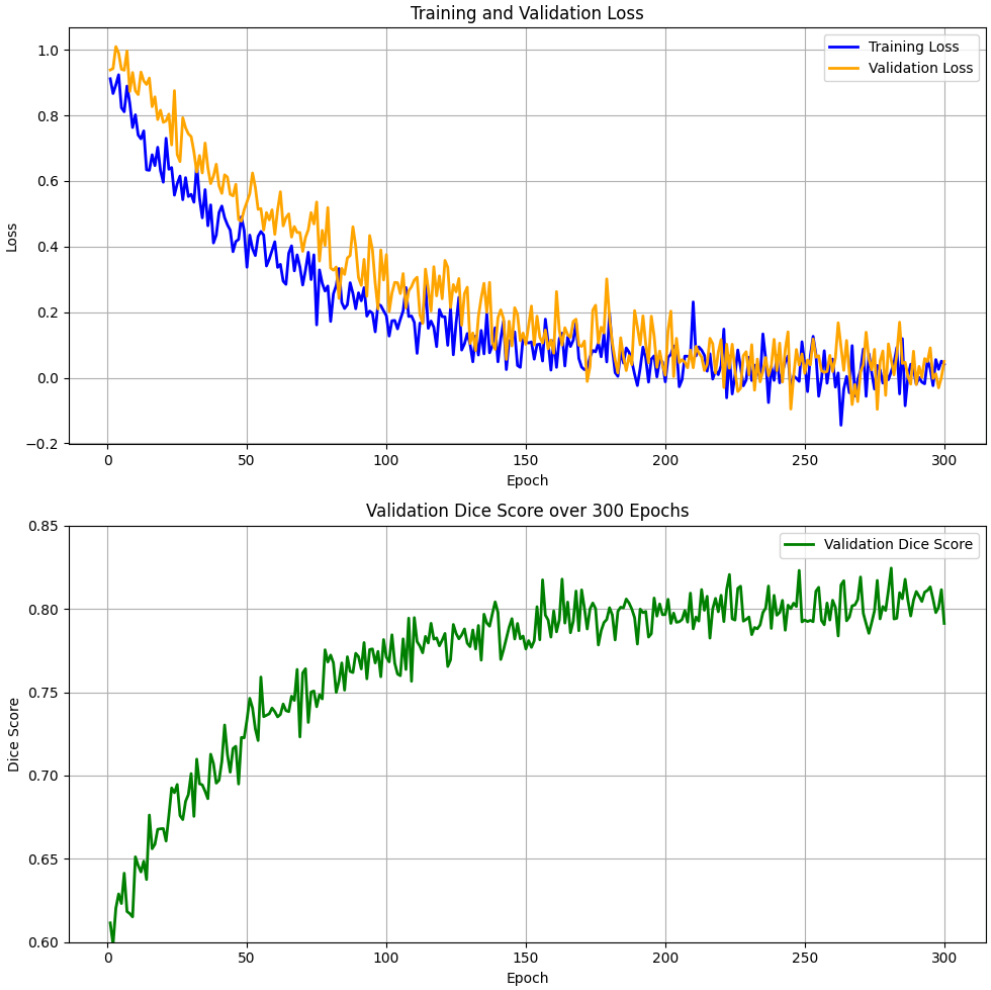

Figure 7. *Training Dynamics of TransUNet over 300 Epochs. The left plot shows the training and validation loss curves, which decrease steadily indicating consistent convergence. The right plot shows the validation Dice score improving and stabilizing around 0.75–0.78.*

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