UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
Department of Computer Science and Technology

IT Strategy Committee
16th February 2021 at 3 p.m. via Microsoft Teams

Minutes

Present:

Professor Simon Moore (SWM) - Chair   Dr Rafal Mantiuk (RF)
Professor Alastair Beresford (ARB)   Dr Abraham Martin (AM) - external
Dr Stewart Carswell (SC)   Mr Malcolm Scott (MS)
Mr Graham Hatt (GH)   Dr Andreas Vlachos (AV)
Professor Mateja Jamnik (MJ)   Mrs Jo de Bono (JD) - Secretary

1. **Apologies for absence**
   None.

2. **Committee Membership**
   The Committee Membership was agreed.

3. **Terms of Reference**
   The Chair asked Members of the Committee if they had any comments pertaining to the Terms of Reference or if they would like any changes.

   The Chair asked Members to consider the following:

   1. To consider if membership of the Committee is appropriate and that categories of staff are represented and supported in relation to the Terms of Reference.
   2. To consider how the whole department is represented. It is most easy for people to represent their own individual group rather than a consensus view across the entire department. The Terms of Reference indicate that the Committee should be inclusive, and this may affect how the Committee operates. In particular, the Committee may need to survey people from time to time which may determine appropriate responses.

   Remit of the Committee
   The Chair reported that the remit of the Committee is to gather requirements and to set a general direction, and work with the Computer Officers to help guide them and then leave them to deliver. It is not to provide technical solutions. It is also important to consider the finances - how do we ensure that money goes round the system in the right way (not necessarily to say how things are spent or raising the money) but to try and guide the process.

   MS queried why the £20K threshold for purchasing was not in alignment with any of the University procurement thresholds. It was agreed that ARB would seek HoD approval to raise the threshold from 20K to 25K as it was agreed that it would make sense to align the thresholds.

   The Terms of Reference were agreed.

   ACTION 1: ARB to seek HoD approval to raise threshold for purchasing from 20K to 25K.

4. **Declaration of AOB**
   None.

5. **Future Agendas**
   i)   To consider future agendas (longstanding items in addition to exceptional items)?

   The following longstanding items were agreed:
   1. MS and GH to provide a short update on current issues and also highlight future potential issues (that may require funding).
    2. Report on the School of Technology (SoT) IT Strategy Committee and any changes at UIS. Review the balance between central provision (if fit for purpose often easiest for us to adopt) vs. providing infrastructure and support that is very much specialised to the department.

   Proposed future agenda item: Revisit and reassess regularly (termly/yearly) the biggest demand for computing resources for each course and how the demand can be best managed. It was agreed that MJ would bring this item back to another meeting with a recommendation of what we might measure and how it might be measured.

   ACTION 2: MJ to bring item back to another meeting with a recommendation of what we might measure and how it might be measured.

   There was a general discussion on GPU resources in the department.
   AV raised the issue of capacity for Research Groups. MS confirmed that there is plenty of spare capacity on the research GPU pool (the constraint is the MPhil GPUs) so please direct people at departmental facilities if they cannot meet their needs on the HPC, and it is useful to know that there is demand.
   In terms of grant proposals, how can we maintain flexibility towards needs and advise so that we maintain best use of resources? (AV)
   The Chair noted that a lot of recently newly appointed staff (and some more established staff) may not know what available facilities there are in the department.
   The Chair is keen to ensure that we do end up with enough money on grants to cover equipment costs and so on, wherever it can be justified to the sponsor. It was noted that there are cultural differences across the different research groups in the department as to what extent people expect things to be provided centrally vs. own research grants and this is an issue that the Committee can look further into.

   ii)   Agree frequency of meetings.
   It was agreed to hold one more meeting this term and another meeting early next term; subsequent meetings would then be held termly.

   iii)   Intersection with School of Technology IT Strategy Committee.
   GH gave a brief overview of the report circulated from the previous meeting.

6. **Covid-19 Pandemic**
   i)   To receive an update on spending of the University fund by Alastair Beresford.
   The department has received funding of £101K from the University to support additional expenses related to teaching due to covid. The department has spent around 40K. There is no defined end date, but nevertheless we should be looking to try and spend the remainder of the money fairly promptly otherwise it might be collected.

ii) To consider future resources for remote working.

MJ proposed that it would be an opportune time, given our experience of remote working, to consider which modes have proven to be more effective than others that we should support in the future. For example, slack channels have been found to be an extremely useful means of communication and connection and this is likely to continue when we are physically back in the building. What is it that we should continue to encourage, use and support post-pandemic? Should the Committee look more systematically at providing support across the department post-pandemic in respect of new ways of working and is this within the Committee's remit?

To what extent will things need support vs. happen organically, or are there are ways of providing examples of working that might help others? (SWM)

As a forward-looking department, there are practices that we have learnt that are good so we should put as part of our support that we provide in the future (e.g. Slack channels) (MJ).

In terms of teaching, a portion of lectures will remain online which is a shift in delivery style and technique and something that we need think about support for in the future (ARB).

The University has provided the department with Microsoft Teams and GH confirmed that there is a Teams external collaboration group to enable communications with external institutions.

The issue was raised that when administrators are provided with new platforms it should be a requirement that they are given adequate training (JD). In terms of IT strategy and resources, training should be explicitly part of those resources (whether sourced in department or not). (MJ) What is the mechanism for ensuring adequate training is routinely provided?

To what extent can administration be done remotely? It was noted that administrative procedures and process in some areas such as finance and HR still rely on paper in filing cabinets, which makes remote working more difficult.

7. **Planning / Future Needs**

Re points 1&2 in the ToR:
1. Ensuring that all new requirements are communicated to the IT teams in a timely fashion: for instance, requirements for additional equipment to support teaching.
2. Ensuring that mechanisms are in place so the needs of the various users in the Department can be responded to effectively.

i) How should the Committee define needs, in particular staffing needs?

ii) To decide upon the mechanism for communicating needs to the Committee.

The Chair noted that there may be various mechanisms that the Committee would use i.e. surveys on key topics. A mechanism is needed to allow people to communicate needs to the Committee.

MJ suggested that when people say which courses they are going to teach the following year, there is a built-in rubric with monitoring which asks if you require any special additional resources to give a realistic indication of need.

MS stated that MPhil projects are asked to specify but the information arrives with sys-admin on the day of the start of the project, so for planning purposes it would be better to do it further in advance. However, for MPhil projects one does not know in advance so it may be that more emphasis will need to be put on the PIs to take responsibility.

It was agreed that Committee Members should reflect on other mechanisms for communicating needs to the Committee and bring suggestions back to the next meeting.

ACTION 3: All Committee Members to reflect on mechanisms for communicating needs to the Committee and bring suggestions back to the next meeting.

8. **Future email strategy**
   Needs consideration due to hermes reaching end-of-life.

The Chair reported that the University carried out an extensive consultation process and the outcome is irreversible. A few members of the department would miss Hermes and would like an open standard compliant email system. It is clear from the report that linux users are not well catered for by this provision.   (An interesting observation is that email may be diminishing in importance). In terms of compliance however, it is not clear what will happen with GDPR, and this is something that needs to be factored. *The Chair proposed that this is one area where a survey would need to be carried out to ascertain the view that is representative of the department as a whole.* MS reported that it would not be a big undertaking to set up an email system within the department, the issue would be supporting it. The Chair indicated that the HoD was unwilling for CO time to be spent supporting a departmental-run email service.

ARB reported that University had gone through a very long and thorough process of analysis so is very hesitant to see the department set up a local email service unless there are serious deficiencies with the proposed one. It was noted that there are some concerns however concerning the transition, especially that it is not an IMAP compliant email standard.

ARB raised the issue of whether there was any possibility of the department getting a G-Suite gmail system configured for cam.ac.uk or a domain that we are in control of (which would solve the concern of GDPR), or is that a route that UIS does not wish to pursue. In principle, this could be relatively easy to do.

AM reported that when UIS carried out the review all considerations were submitted and due to security incidents collected in the report it was decided that the University should move forward more quickly to exchange online as it was providing with second factor authentication as part of the whole suite.

The Chair stated that an alternative option may be to look at an external buy-in service that could be possibly used for a few people and this might be the most viable, cost effective option.

The Chair agreed to follow up with a few other members of the Committee and bring something back to the next meeting.

ACTION 4: SWM to follow up with a few members of the Committee and report back to the Committee.

9. **Resources for Teaching**
   To consider GPU resources for machine learning and teaching.

   This item was discussed earlier in the meeting (see above). In respect of resources for teaching MJ discussed trying to ascertain what resources will be needed and this is something that Committee will be able to make recommendations on. This is for MPhil teaching and projects, and PhDs, but somebody will need to look at this for undergraduates.

   MS gave a brief status report on GPUs for teaching. The department has 8 GPUs bought for MPhil projects but if there is a sudden need for a lot of students requiring a GPU at the same time to meet the same coursework deadline that puts a huge demand on resources. MS proposed that if teaching is going to continue to need inhouse GPUs then the department will need to expand the MPhil GPU pool quite considerably, or set it up so they can use AWS GPUs, etc.

   There was also a discussion on what resources the department has from a research point of view and how they are allocated, and if resources are generally available from the department or are more tied to particular projects/research teams.

   It was decided to bring the item back to the next meeting with concrete numbers in terms of what resource we have and then we can make suggestions.

   ACTION 5: All Members to bring concrete numbers in terms of resources to the next meeting.

10. **Funding for shared computer infrastructure (donations, etc.)**
    It was agreed that this item would be brought back to the next meeting.

11. **Any other business**
    There was no other business.

12. **Date of next meeting**
    A doodle poll will be circulated.

    ACTION 6: JD to circulate poll for date of next meeting.