

IT Strategy Committee
27th May 2021 at 10 a.m. via Microsoft Teams

Minutes

Present:

Professor Simon Moore (SWM) - Chair
Professor Alastair Beresford (ARB)
Dr Stewart Carswell (SC)
Graham Hatt (GH)
Professor Mateja Jamnik (MJ)

Dr Rafal Mantiuk (RF)
Dr Abraham Martin (AM) - UIS
Malcolm Scott (MS)
Dr Andreas Vlachos (AV)
Ms Jo de Bono (JD) – Secretary

1. Apologies for absence

None.

2. Approval of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

Unconfirmed Minutes of the meeting held on 11th March 2021 were approved.

3. Matters Arising/Actions from the Previous Meeting

(a) *GPU Resources for Teaching (Item 7)*

To consider GPU resources for machine learning and teaching.

MJ is in the process of finalising a document and will circulate recommendations with a long-term vision to the Committee Members. The proposal will be reviewed either by circulation or if needed another meeting will be scheduled. MJ agreed to bring this item back to the next meeting.

A general discussion followed on GPU resources in the department. The Chair noted that the financial aspect of the proposal would also need to be considered.

Action: MJ to circulate document on GPUs to Committee Members for review.

(b) *Funding for shared computer infrastructure (donations, etc) (Item 8)*

GH reported that he had spoken to James Matheson at UIS who provided an update of upcoming infrastructure bids but with no firm implementation dates. GH will ask James for a roadmap of projects and will circulate to the Committee Members.

The Chair raised the issue of whether more encouragement of infrastructure to be included in some of the larger grants to be submitted should be considered (e.g. AI research).

It was noted that there are other funding sources such as donations. MJ noted that it is easier to attract funding by targeting one specific item (such as a GPU cluster) from individuals or companies (such as Nvidia) that wish to donate.

Action: GH to report on upcoming UIS projects from James Matheson at the next meeting.

4. Standing Items

(a) *MS and GH to provide an update on current issues.*

MS and GH gave an update on current issues.

GH reported that there is a backlog on helpdesk tickets and response times are slow/not as quick as they should be. Steps are being taken to address this. The issue of procurement was also raised. MS reported that a lot of time is taken sourcing items and chasing suppliers and it was suggested that some chasing/following up of suppliers could be done by non-technical staff e.g. finance assistants and receptionists who are familiar with CUFs. If the expectation is to provide laptops for all PhDs, these will need to be ordered soon for the next academic year (MS).

The 'sys-admin' ticketing system and lack of agreed response timeframes/system of prioritisation was again highlighted (JD). GH reported that the system is being reviewed. It was noted that increased staffing levels as well as training and sharing of knowledge amongst COs is required. The key question to address is does the current system function effectively as a helpdesk and what needs to be done to improve the ticketing system going forward (SWM)?

In summary, the Chair concluded there is clearly a great need on all aspects of the operation of the department and we need to ensure that we have sufficient CO staff.

Action:

GH/JD to discuss sys-admin response times.

GH to review the ticketing system and report back to the next meeting.

SWM/MS/GH to review CO staffing levels.

(b) *Report on the School's IT Strategy Committee and update from UIS.*

AM reported the following:

- Management UI (Ronin) for AWS designed for research which simplifies the creation/management of AWS infrastructure.
- Currently running a trial in the Clinical School.
- UIS have negotiated discounts when using AWS services.

SWM enquired as to what the current plans are in terms of the helpdesk for compute resources for professional services staff. Is there a long-term move that there might be provide more central provision and support, particularly around the finance & so on. AM reported that UIS are looking at alternatives to replace their helpdesk and that this will require a significant amount of time and money on configuration to make it work as it should. The process will be reviewed by the Service Management Office.

SWM reported that in the past the department paid additional money to route tickets through the UIS helpdesk in the first instance. AM reported that if this was desired by the department then this would need to be discussed directly with them.

5. Review of the email survey

To review the results of the departmental email survey.

GH circulated the results of the survey to Committee Members. In brief, the results showed that the PSS appear content with the provision, PhD students appear largely content with the provision. However, UTOs (in particular) and postdocs are not content with the provision. It appears that 80% of UTOs are unwilling to use exchange. The strength of feeling was noted by the Committee.

This strongly points to the department needing to explore if there is an alternative that can be provided or recommended by the Committee.

The Chair sought recommendations from GH or MS on how best to proceed. GH initially plans to speak to the Department of Engineering (who are in a similar position) to see if there is anything that can be done at a school level (in terms of resources).

ARB raised the issue of 'gmail' being an alternative in principle and whether this would be a viable option technically. Will it be acceptable for the workplace enabled for cst.cam.uk domain for email? AM concurred that in principle it was technically a viable option.

UIS trialled gmail when the ISE set up a working group to decide the future of email and the decision was made by the ISE and not UIS. Any further decision therefore would need to be made at the same level of the ISE. To note, google plans to move their licence (it used to offer all universities and education institutions an unlimited licence) to limit the free version to only offer 100 terabyte for the entire institution and this will have a significant impact on the University as a whole (which currently uses 1 petabyte). Changes will need to be introduced before the July 2022 deadline. This may have financial implications for the department.

The Chair proposed to set up a working group to look at this (via circulation). The deadline is by the end of the calendar year latest, but if something else is going to be in place it will need to be done over the summer.

Action: SWM to set up working group to look at the department's future email strategy.

6. Laptop by default for PhD students

To discuss laptop by default for PhD students policy as proposed by the HoD-Team.

The proposal to provide a laptop (up to the value of £800 under the current departmental scheme) for all PhD students was discussed.

It was noted that many incoming PhD students have their own laptops which have been acquired on grants and they are happy/prefer to continue to use them. If every student requires a laptop under the current scheme then the financial aspect would need to be considered. However, it is estimated that only a small number of students will require laptops under the scheme.

It was agreed to produce a couple of options (2 or 3 laptop specs) that students can choose from and to keep a supply of these laptops in stock in the department. MS noted that they would need to be ordered soon to be available for students at the beginning of the next academic year, given the current delay in expected delivery times.

The hardware needs and ergonomic set-up for students returning to work in the building were discussed and costs involved would need to be considered. New starters within the last year or so will not have been issued with any hardware (MS). MJ noted that some people may start with their own machine and decide what they want post-arrival, given having to make that decision remotely is more difficult.

The Chair summarised that there is a general mechanism in terms of provision that is working but some finer details require finalising – are laptops provided by the department vs. grant; is the current departmental scheme a contribution and if students want something more expensive they can chip in or it can be funded off the grant.

The Committee's strategic decision is that the department is highly flexible but PhD students are encouraged to use a laptop by default if that is the most efficient way of working for them. The text on the website may need to be revised.

The Chair concluded that the Committee approves the HoD's proposal that by default the department will provide all PhD students with a laptop.

Action:

MS/GH to provide 2/3 laptop specs for PhD students.

MS/GH to order a supply of laptops and monitors and keep them in stock for students at the beginning of the next academic year.

SC to revise text on website in respect of the department's scheme for use of laptops.

7. Sys-admin

To discuss sys-admin response times and general workflow.

Discussed above.

8. Operational issues

To discuss staffing levels and training in the department and how this fits with the needs process.

It was agreed that there needs to be an increased level of staffing of Computer Officers to provide the required level of support in the department.

Action: SWM to discuss needs with MS and GH, and send a proposal to the Head of Department.

9. Any other business

There was no other business.

10. Date of next meeting

TBC.