

IT Strategy Committee  
3<sup>rd</sup> March 2022 at 11 a.m. via Microsoft Teams

Minutes

Present:

Professor Alastair Beresford (ARB) – acting Chair  
Dr Stewart Carswell (SC)  
Professor Mateja Jamnik (MJ)  
Dr Rafal Mantiuk (RM)

Dr Abraham Martin (AM)  
Daniel Porter (DP)  
Malcolm Scott (MS)  
Andreas Vlachos (AV)  
Jo de Bono (JD) - Secretary

**1. Apologies for absence**

Apologies were received from Professor Simon Moore (Chair) – Professor Alastair Beresford (ARB) agreed to chair the meeting in his absence.

**2. Committee Membership**

ARB announced that Daniel Porter (DP), who replaced Graham Hatt as IT Support Manager in the department, is a new member of the IT Strategy Committee. DP introduced himself to the Committee Members.

**3. Approval of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 5<sup>th</sup> October 2021 were approved.

**4. Matters Arising**

JD announced that UIS are now onboarding Booker, an automated booking room system. JD and one other person from the department would be attending training. It is hoped that the new system will be ready to use in the department from the beginning of the next academic year.

**5. Actions from the Previous Meeting**

(a) *GPU Resources for Teaching (Item 3a)*

MS gave a brief summary of usage and reported that use of the pool of GPUs for PhDs and researchers has been steadily increasing but is not yet at an unmanageable level. He forecast that at some point in the relatively near future we will hit the capacity limit. The pool of GPUs for Masters' students has seen a much lower demand this year possibly because of upgrades to HPCs and the lower-than-expected number of Masters' students (ARB). It was agreed that a proper evaluation of HPCs vs in-house GPUs is required (MJ).

**ACTION:**

- MJ/MS and Nic Lane to review the proposal and revise numbers.
- Timeline – agreed to meet asap and not to wait for next meeting.
- It was agreed that a final decision would be taken at the next meeting.
- The Committee was content in principle to look to try and increase the capacity (the detail of how much will be a function of how much usage (Mateja et al) and how much budget we have (HoD). The department will try to do something to improve capacity for next academic year if deemed necessary.
- MS to enquire if the old GPUs can be retained.

(b) *Review of the email survey (Item 3c)*

MS reported that Fastmail is now set up and working in the department and has been very well received. The number of people using it is lower than forecast but it can continue to be offered as an alternative to exchange online.

The Chair thanked MS for overseeing the smooth transition.

(c) *Laptop by default for PhD students (Item 3d)*

The department's policy is to offer the choice of either a standard lab desktop or laptop, or a contribution towards a laptop. The HoD has preferred that people move to laptops by default. The method for getting an £800 contribution seems to have been well received. There is a small pool of standard desktops and standard spec Dell laptops in stock. It was agreed that some users do need a Mac for their work and either individuals are prepared to pay extra, combine the departmental funds with scholarship money or other grant funding.

DP will establish some standard devices with standard options, not just for PhDs, (supportable on both windows and mac) to keep in stock to avoid supply chain issues.

A supply of desk monitors that students can connect to laptops will be introduced gradually.

**ACTION:** MS/DP to ensure that the policy is updated on the website.

(d) *Sys-admin (Item 3e)*

DP has a lot of experience of the ticketing system university-wide and reported that the system is not being managed efficiently or operating effectively as a support service. This is an operational matter of high priority.

DP is working with MS on how to improve the system. Broadly, all work goes into one queue with no real sense of ownership or responsibility and a triage system will be developed to target specific individuals to deal with issues (operated by a new member of staff as a first line helpdesk technician).

(d) *Operational Issues (Item 3f)*

The department is aiming to advertise a new hardware specialist role in March 2022 and a technician to fit in with support requirements outlined above – a role spec for a new member of staff to support the ticketing system. There is a potential further new role to support machine learning (including to manage and operate pool of GPUs).

(e) *GDPR (Item 5)*

A working group to be set up to review the department's strategy for managing personal data.

**ACTION:** It was agreed to defer this item to the next meeting.

## 6. Standing Items

- (a) MS and DP to provide an update on current issues.

MS reported:

1. Project to modernise virtual machine infrastructure - the next stage is to look at replacing the VM hosts, which will cost in the region of £60-75K.  
It was agreed that MS would bring a proposal to the next meeting to see if the Committee is content with that level of expenditure on infrastructure over the next year or so before seeking HoD approval.
2. Machine room GN09 is running close to capacity - it is about 90% space usage, 100% UPS power capacity, and close to limit of cooling capacity. It will be necessary to start prioritising space usage at some point soon and look at the older space inefficient kit or power inefficient kit in order to make the best use of the space. This is not yet a pressing concern but will become increasingly urgent (particularly UPS).  
ARB suggested that MS give a brief presentation on the machine room at a Wednesday meeting to raise awareness.

### **ACTION:**

- MS to write a proposal for replacing VM hosts (2 or 3 price points) to bring to the next meeting/circulate in advance to Committee Members.
- MS to prepare a short presentation on the machine room for Wednesday.

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

AM reported on recent UIS updates:

- UIS are currently running a large Identity and Access Management Programme to consolidate the multiple identity and access management systems. Workshops are being held for departments and you are encouraged as a department to attend.
- VMs - UIS have bought the equipment on license and is currently under installation.
- UIS have worked with the Clinical School on offering a secure research environment for NHS data which may be of interest to those working in cyber security.
- Lecture capture has now been installed in several locations in the department.  
The plan is to automate the whole process of booking and recording. UIS now have dedicated Booker management staff and it is expected that the whole management of lecture capture recordings will go through Booker in the near future.  
The University is rethinking its policy on consent and moving to a different default (yes rather than no). A decision has not yet been made.
- Card technology – UIS has started the process of engaging with some consultancy agencies to see if the technology can be replaced with something new that is compatible with mobile phones alongside a physical card based on a new technology which does not have known security flaws. If this goes ahead, departments would be required to buy new card readers for all doors.
- MS noted that currently a very old installation of VEREX Director is used to run the card system and is it anticipated that that would be needed to be replaced too. AM reported that UIS proposes either (a) retain the current model just change the reader infrastructure so it is still compatible with the existing technology; or (b) a centralised system that departments can access and modify access control for individual physical spaces/departments.

- MS would very much like to replace/modernise the old VEREX system (as it is difficult to support) and replace it with a centralised solution that meets the needs of the department.

MS noted UIS is proposing a new policy for @cam email addresses (which may remove the ability for us to offer former students and staff with email forwarding from their @cl address for life) – the School’s IT strategy Committee response would like to keep control over how each department’s domain is managed. We are awaiting a response from UIS.

## **7. Undergraduate teaching machines**

The need/requirement for students to use actual physical machines in the Intel Lab was discussed. There are two separate issues:

1. Some students may currently not have a laptop and the department needs to provide support.
2. Are there any courses where it is mandatory for students to use the machines? It was agreed that this question would be referred to the Teaching Committee.

DP emailed Wednesday (current usage and what future usage might be) and will feedback to the Committee to consider possible options.

## **8. Database**

To discuss the department’s database functionality:

- (i) What is the key function of the database
- (ii) Is it fit for purpose
- (iii) What, if any, alternative solutions are available

- (i) The database is not a single entity but a set of different components. We are looking to see what there is, what we need to replace and what is the best way to replace them.
- (ii) The database is not sustainable in its current format.
- (iii) We need to look at what solutions there are for replacing the parts of it that are needed.

Admissions has moved to Panel. This is an example of one in-house database function moving to a more suitable product and this can be done for other functions as well (MS).

**ACTION:** DP to provide a verbal update at next meeting.

## **9. Any other business**

MJ reported that the department did not have a Mac laptop that she could borrow recently when her laptop broke. DP reaffirmed that the approach would be revised to ensure that department would keep a small number of Macs in stock.

## **10. Date of next meeting**

It was agreed that the next meeting would be arranged for next term.