

IT Strategy Committee, Department of Computer Science and Technology
21st January 2025 at 14:00
SW00, William Gates Building

MINUTES

Present

Richard Mortier, Chair [RM]

Daniel Porter, IT Support Manager [DP]

*Sarah Bainsfair, Finance Analyst [SB]
[MS]

Malcolm Scott, IT Infrastructure Specialist

*Steve Cummins, School of Technology [SC] Mark Cresham, Secretary [MC]

Tim Jones, UTO Rep [TJ]

*Attended as a guest

1. Apologies for absence

Abraham Martin Campillo, Helen Francis, Rob Harle, Nic Lane, Sam Nallaperuma, Thomas Sauerwald.

2. Approval of the Minutes of the previous meeting

Minutes of the meeting held on 2nd December 2024 were approved.

3. Matters arising

4. Actions from the previous meeting

(i) GPU Upgrades

RM - noted that since NL was unable to attend, the committee would defer his update to a future meeting.

(ii) Legacy Services

DP - stated that there is no definitive list of services scheduled for deprecation, but IT Services has identified a few that may be considered. Some services have already been deprecated as opportunities have arisen, such as the legacy print service and legacy email.

MS - noted that while a comprehensive list does not currently exist, potential services for deprecation often emerge when reviewing other systems and processes.

DP - confirmed that IT Services will review the current list of services and highlight specific examples for further discussion.

MS - suggested that aside from outright deprecating services, there may also be opportunities to simplify maintenance and improve efficiency.

SC - identified DBWebserver and asset management as potential candidates for review.

RM - proposed that the committee should assess existing services that have been flagged, and provide input on which examples require further discussion. RM also requested that this topic be included as a main business item for the next ITSC meeting.

(iii) Network Upgrades

MS - reported that he and SB have briefly discussed the financial aspects of the network upgrades. While he has yet to finalise a detailed timeline, he confirmed that additional firewalls will be ordered soon. However, the timing for ordering core switches remains undecided.

SB - stated that £75K has been marked as committed against the project. She emphasised the need for more concrete timelines by mid-February, in line with the half-year end.

MS - noted that the firewalls will take several months to arrive. To mitigate potential issues, he plans to purchase half of them initially and set them up to ensure they function as expected.

SB - confirmed that half of the allocated budget is already committed, with the remaining funds expected to be committed soon.

ACTION

MS will place a firewall order and update SB on expected timelines.

(iv) Separation of Department Websites

RM - informed the committee that he has updated Markus (mgk25) on the plan to separate the Department's websites. However, mgk25 would like to review an unspecified document before proposing an alternative approach for the committee's evaluation.

MS - noted that he was unaware that the Department maintains two separate directories of people—one on the main departmental Drupal website (cst) and another on the teaching website (cl). To streamline this, he has set the cl site directory to redirect to the cst site.

RM - highlighted an additional issue regarding API access to UIS-provided services. Currently, API access is not always available, limiting support for Linux clients, with some MacOS and Windows applications that do not support Linux. Expanding API access would provide greater flexibility for the Department and the wider University, allowing for greater automation.

RM - noted that while API access is possible in some instances, it comes at an additional cost, which would need to be discussed at the school level, where the case could be made that it would improve operational efficiency.

RM - confirmed that no changes have been made yet to the teaching website (cl).

ACTION

RM to review the alternative proposal from mgk25 and present the findings to the committee for evaluation.

(v) Website Migration

MS - stated that he will begin compiling a list of websites within the Department that are not maintained by IT Services, aiming to have it ready, or partially for the next meeting.

MS - highlighted that (especially with the planned introduction of the new firewall), machines will either be externally facing or will be inside with access to internal services. While these websites are not maintained by IT Services, he stressed that there is still a responsibility to ensure their security.

MS - asked whether the list should focus only on risky machines or include all web-related systems.

RM - requested that the list include every web-related system, noting that even an incomplete list would be valuable for review and could be refined over subsequent meetings.

ACTION

MS will start compiling a list of websites within the Department that are not maintained by IT Services.

(vi) Cisco to Teams Phone Migration

DP - stated that he has produced and circulated the plan for the Cisco to Teams phone migration. As the timescales are now less urgent, no specific deadlines have been set. However, IT Services will not lose sight of the plan.

RM - requested that the committee be informed once timescales are determined, as the migration remains valuable despite the reduced urgency.

SC - asked whether it would be beneficial to decommission unused numbers to avoid incurring the small associated cost.

DP - clarified that this has already been done, and the current plan is to proactively prepare for the potential full decommissioning of Cisco telephony in the future.

5. Standing items

(i) UIS update

RM - reminded the committee that AM sends his apologies for this meeting. Consequently, updates on relevant developments from UIS can be addressed at a future meeting.

(ii) IT Services Updates

Support Team - Hybrid Meeting Space

DP and MC - confirmed that the equipment cost for the hybrid meeting upgrade is just under £10K [£9,745.77] (ex. VAT) as it is an internal purchase, while the installation cost is just under £2.5K [£2,460.48] (inc. VAT) as it is an external purchase.

RM - noted that this cost is slightly higher than expected.

DP - clarified that the total includes the addition of a 65" screen to be supplied and installed in SW00, on top of the full hybrid meeting setup in GS15.

MC - stated that the installers (AAVS) can also provide acoustic panels. During the project, he will obtain a rough cost estimate for future consideration, in case SW00 is upgraded to a full hybrid meeting space, which may require sound treatment.

RM - highlighted that a teaching room (FS07) currently has an old projector with only VGA input, requiring an HDMI-to-VGA adapter.

MC - confirmed that the IT Services Support Team is aware of the issue and that it has led to discussions about conducting a full building AV review.

DP - stated that a strategic AV plan could help justify upgrades or removals—some rooms could stop being AV-equipped, while others could be prioritised for maintenance and improvements.

RM - requested that teaching rooms be prioritised in this review.

MC - asked whether the old library (GN06) is still in use for teaching.

RM - shared that he has discussed this with Edna Murphy (em375) from the Academic Division. There may be a funding opportunity to refurbish GN06 into a formal teaching space. To qualify for funding, the room must be designated for educational purposes, be shareable, accessible, and available on Booker.

Infrastructure Team - Legacy Email

MS - reported that the migration of the email domains to Forward Email has been successfully completed, with only minor teething issues. An initial problem occurred where emails from the Department's domains to Sympa lists were bouncing, as Mimecast marked them as suspicious. High-level discussions between Forward Email and Mimecast took place, and the issue now appears to be resolved.

MS - noted that the project is not yet fully complete, as some old email infrastructure still needs to be tidied up.

RM - asked if there are plans to remove remaining users from the old email infrastructure and whether new email accounts are being set up on the filer.

MS - responded that he nudges individuals to migrate when possible, with varying success. However, some long-retired users remain, and migrating their email from the filer is not straightforward. Additionally, IT Services does not configure new email on the filer.

SC - mentioned that discussions are ongoing at a school level regarding visitor accounts, statuses, and access policies.

RM - noted that the Head of Department (HoD) should decide whether to continue hosting email on the filer for long-standing and well-respected contributors. He suggested that it would be useful to quantify the support costs and categorise users (e.g. long-retired users).

SC - asked whether a definitive timeline could be set for when the old email infrastructure will reach end-of-life.

DP - suggested first assessing the number of remaining users and then evaluating whether alternative services could be offered.

MS - stated that the old email infrastructure will gradually be phased out. It is not actively maintained, though remaining users can still raise tickets if issues arise. A possible approach could be to provide proactive support for five years, after which the infrastructure would no longer be considered secure or supported.

Infrastructure Team - GPUs

MS - confirmed that he has ordered a GPU server after receiving funding approval. This upgrade will enhance the shared GPU server, increasing its capacity from 1 GPU to 4 GPUs.

MS - also reported that he has started tidying up AWS accounts used by researchers. Some old AWS accounts were originally provided by a previous reseller who no longer wants to support them but has not disclosed which researchers are using them. He aims to migrate AWS accounts to Jisc, which can effectively bring them under departmental control. He noted that Jisc and UIS can assist in managing AWS.

RM - suggested asking the reseller to stop hosting the accounts and seeing if any users raise a complaint. He also noted that it is poor practice to have potentially important data stored on unmanaged AWS servers.

SC - recommended sending an email notification to affected users, informing them of the planned migration.

MS - stated that he will attempt again to obtain user information from the reseller. If unsuccessful, he will request that AWS accounts created before 2019 be deactivated after a two-month grace period or an alternative timeline.

6. Main business

(i) Matlab Licensing

DP - noted that fewer than 10 people within the Department critically depend on MATLAB. The total demand is not large, but there is a small number of less than 10 people who rely on it more heavily. He further noted that Engineering and Physics appear to have a stronger influence over central MATLAB license arrangements.

SC - mentioned that 77 people claiming to be working in Computer Science have indicated that they use MATLAB, which raises the question of how to fund the license. He suggested that the Department needs to decide whether it should continue contributing to MATLAB costs and, if so, how much.

RM - questioned whether the Department should keep paying, and if so, for how many users specifically.

DP - offered to review email responses to determine exactly who requires MATLAB and how frequently it is used. He further indicated that a research group is currently paying for Slack, also with around 77 people using it.

SC - estimated that if the Department were to contribute approximately £3200, spread across 10 PIs, the cost for individual PIs would be minimal.

RM - stated that these details should be gathered and presented to the committee for further discussion.

MS - pointed out the challenges in managing multiple license payments, especially between departments. He likened this concern to situations similar to Slack, where funding becomes unclear.

SC - proposed that creating a Departmental framework to guide decisions on software purchases, maintenance, and usage thresholds etc could be beneficial. He further noted that this could prevent ad-hoc decision making for each new tool.

DP - observed that software usage within the Department typically falls into two extremes. Widely used tools (e.g., Microsoft products) that justify a central license, or research tools funded by the individual groups that need them. He further noted that there are relatively few cases where a large number of users require a tool that does not already have established funding.

RM - remarked that software tools often gain traction informally over time. He emphasised the importance of monitoring usage growth or decline, to decide when Departmental involvement and funding become necessary. He requested that this is added as an item to the agenda for the next ITSC meeting, so it can be discussed in more detail.

(ii) IT Team Recruitment

MS - announced that an advertisement has been placed for a Linux System Administrator within the Infrastructure Team.

DP - explained that there is insufficient budget to hire someone in the Support Team, though he would like to replace Chris's (ckh11) position if possible, which would allow him to focus on other responsibilities.

MS - further noted the main challenge is a lack of resources for Windows system administration, currently handled by both DP and MS.

RM - asked if some responsibilities could be transferred to UIS or other people.

SC - inquired about the gap between the Department's requirements and available resources.

DP - clarified that hiring has not been definitively ruled out. If the Department continues to grow, a new IT position will become necessary.

MS - noted that the Toolkit lacks API support, complicating potential automation.

SC - suggested raising this with UIS to determine how best automation can be handled.

RM - agreed that UIS should address this need.

SB - inquired about the anticipated start date for the new Linux System Administrator.

MS - estimated a minimum of three months, potentially extending to six or nine months if notice periods are lengthy or suitable candidates are not found.

(iii) Support Team Device Purchasing

DP - highlighted that an updated policy would ensure the Department recovers as much as possible from grants for PhD equipment purchases, thereby reducing Departmental costs. He noted that many users have varied requirements, and the existing policy is outdated. A clear policy would help guide funding processes, address frequent support requests, and handle replacement for outdated machines (particularly if users lack funding).

TJ - agreed that this idea seems sensible.

RM - suggested incorporating tablets and phones into the standard equipment list for consideration.

DP - explained that, in practice, the Department only deals with a small number of tablets (mostly iPads). Holding them in stock does not seem beneficial, as requests are sporadic and highly specific. Standard primary device setups (e.g., laptops, peripherals) are easier to define. Phones also tend to vary between those wanting the cheapest option and those seeking premium features, so they do not fit neatly into a standard list.

SC - noted that if someone wants a higher-end device, they can pay any difference in cost.

DP - added that, while the Department generally advises against purchasing a tablet instead of a laptop, the decision ultimately rests with the supervisor. If the tablet cost

is comparable to a standard laptop (approximately £1,500–£2,000), the Department can treat it in a similar way.

RM - pointed out the benefits of retiring older devices. The Department still has machines over 10 years old, complicating support and security.

DP - agreed, describing it as part of a broader lifecycle policy. When an outdated device becomes problematic, the user is encouraged to replace it.

RM - stressed the security implications of aging equipment and noted some guidelines recommend replacing machines after four years.

MS - acknowledged there would always be exceptions or special-use devices outside standard policy; however, these should follow a documented process.

RM - mentioned that a detailed policy is necessary to clarify any requirements for devices connecting to the network.

MS - stated that while there is currently an acceptable use policy, additional clauses may be needed to address modern device usage scenarios, including bring-your-own-device (BYOD).

RM - noted the importance of documenting exceptions and establishing a formal process to handle them, ensuring both security and clarity for users and support staff.

7. Any Other Business

(i) University Asset Register

SB - informed the committee that the University failed an audit, necessitating a review and update of the asset register. This process will involve categorising depreciated items - those at zero value, obsolete, or nearing obsolescence.

MS - agreed to undertake the review but highlighted some complications. Some items remain on the register despite no longer being physically present. The cost thresholds for depreciation appear inconsistent, with treatment of items varying depending on their original purchase date. There is a mismatch between the University's asset register and the Department's inventory. He expressed his preference to improve the process.

SB - noted that nine items currently have a zero value.

MS - proposed going through the list.

8. Date of next meeting(s)

- (i) Confirmation of the date, time and location of the next meeting(s).

RM - informed the committee that he would be unavailable for the next scheduled meeting on Tuesday, 29 April 2025.

Consequently, the committee agreed to reschedule the meeting to Monday, 28 April 2025, maintaining the same start time.

Date: 28th April 2025

Time: 14:00 - 15:00

Location: SW00

Date: 17th June 2025

Time: 14:00 - 15:30

Location: SW00