

IT Strategy Committee, Department of Computer Science and Technology 28th April 2025 at
14:00 SW00, William Gates Building

MINUTES

Present

Richard Mortier, chair [RM]

**Nic Lane [NL]

*Sarah Bainsfair [SB]

Sam Nallaperuma [SN]

*Steve Cummins [SC]

Daniel Porter [DP]

**Rob Harle [RH]

Malcolm Scott[MS]

Tim Jones [TJ]

Mark Cresham, Secretary [MC]

*Attended as a guest

**Attended remotely

1. Apologies for absence

Abraham Martin Campillo, Helen Francis, Thomas Sauerwald.

2. Approval of the Minutes of the previous meeting

Minutes of the meeting held on 21st January 2025 were approved.

3. Matters arising

None.

4. Actions from the previous meeting

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(i) GPU Upgrades

NL – Described PyTorch Lightning as useful, offering browser-based or IDE access and GitHub compatibility. However, he noted that the cost is quite high - quoted at 140 USD per team per month - though the vendor is willing to negotiate a lower price. Students who tested Lightning reported minor bugs in browsers other than Chrome, but otherwise found it solid. He believes an allocation of about 35 GPU-hours per month should be sufficient.

RM – Suggested leveraging the Cambridge affiliation to secure a lower pricing tier, possibly through a testimonial and logo placement. He also requested clearer data on usage patterns (e.g. a single student account being used across several courses). Exploring our needs should then give us a clearer idea of what the pricing structure could be.

ACTION

NL will explore potential usage patterns for Lightning, to give clearer idea of potential pricing structure.

(ii) Network Upgrades

MS - confirmed the need for a commercial licence for VyOS (open-source router/firewall OS). He clarified that VyOS is not an existing University supplier, so they will need to be added as such. He further stated that he already has a clear figure for the licence fee and can factor it into the budget alongside the hardware.

SB - flagged that adding a new University supplier is more complex under the current purchasing system. She further advised notifying Louis Massuard (lm242) from Stores, or the Finance team as early as possible to avoid delays.

ACTION

MS will update the committee on the progress of firewall renewal.

(iii) Separation of Department Websites

RM - stated that he has not yet received an alternative proposal from Markus (mgk25), on the separation of the Department's websites, he will therefore follow up with mgk25.

ACTION

RM to remind mgk25 of the need for alternative proposal and present the findings to the committee for evaluation.

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(iv) Website Migration

MS - confirmed he has produced a document listing Department hosted websites. He confirmed that all listed sites are public and not privileged on the internal network. He noted that several entries are also on the decommission list (e.g. trac) and he would prefer to shut them down.

RM suggested a staged shutdown: disable access (404) for a short period, monitor for complaints, then remove permanently.

RH - observed that many systems survive only through informal “life-support” by various individuals. He asked the larger question of what long-term models should be in place for things like ticks and practicals. He estimated at least another year (possibly two) before a full consolidation or replacement is feasible. He further agreed to raise the issue with the Tripos Management Committee (TMC).

RM - raised the need for clarity. Stating that someone must tell MS who actually runs each service (UTO or otherwise). He emphasised using judgment for mission-critical services but urged a “fast path” for obvious legacy pages.

DP - noted that trimming down the web estate fits with broader plans to bring all web development in line with the wider team strategy. He further suggested naming a temporary point-of-contact for each site during decommissioning.

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

DP - stated the need for web-development work brought in line with the wider team strategy. The one-man model (pre-dating DP) that was in place, meant that requests go straight to a single developer who built what was asked for. He stated that each existing solution should be re-examined, and gauged as to whether it is genuinely unique to the department, or is it a generic requirement that could use an off-the-shelf solution. The customised exam-marking system was given as an example.

RM - noted that the department’s current exam system is superior to external alternatives. He supports avoiding unnecessary bespoke work, but notes some custom tools have become essential to all academics. He highlighted that that exam setting is unusual, where each UTO creates their own questions, and that might justify bespoke tooling.

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DP - agrees bespoke code is acceptable if it is clearly the best option, but would prefer that the question is asked every time. He noted that lots of things on the department's website are more complex than necessary, and it is those things that do not align with the wider team strategy. He further stated that he sees no controversy in switching to DS-Print.

MS - confirms DS Print should work on Ubuntu, Debian, and Red Hat.

RM - stated that he hasn't tried DS-Print on Linux in any in depth manner, but he will test it. He noted that there may be a two-sided B/W limitation.

DP - confirmed that two-sided B/W is the default, though printing preferences should be available upon document release from the printer, if not available in the operating system. He plans to extend the web documentation and ensure everyone's machines are up to date. He noted that this ties in with Windows 10 end-of-life and the move to domain-joined laptops.

RM - raised a point from the Recovery Task Force [established by the Information Services Committee (ISC), following the School of Clinical Medicine cyber incident], regarding delays with machine recovery, partly due to obtaining and migrating to new client machines. He suggested using the University Managed Desktop (UMD) image could speed things up.

SC - reported that the School of Technology is surveying why some groups haven't adopted the UMD build, and are planning a workshop to gather requirements.

RM - clarified that some parties were reluctant to use UMD due to perception of UMD, rather than UMD itself which seems to work well. He also noted that committee agendas must stay balanced, covering academic requirements as well as PSS topics.

DP - agreed that this is important.

MS - noted that some systems changes driven by UIS require the same balance.

RM - pointed out that there is an exceptions process, so the case can be made for exceptions when required.

MS - Stated his report on decommissioning legacy infrastructure will be discussed separately, and that he has already talked about the new firewalls. Regarding email, which is now less bespoke, he is currently created policies for SPF, DKIM, DMARC to be available online. This should reduce the risk of external parties spoofing departmental addresses. The side effect may be that messages sent via third-party

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mailing lists or other non-standard routes may be flagged as spam. He believes that no specific action required from the committee at this time.

ACTION

DP and MS to update the committee on recent developments from the CST IT Services: Support Team and Infrastructure Team, respectively.

(iii) Decommissioning of Legacy Services

DP - highlighted a set of services “in the firing line” for decommission or replacement and is seeking committee support. Regarding the DS-Print rollout, users (especially Linux) have been primed that that legacy printers will disappear this summer.

RM - asked how many Linux users have tested DS-Print.

DP clarified that not many Linux users have contacted IT Services, but enough tests have been carried out to be confident that it works. He noted that the aim was to encourage its use. Another email with re-configuration instructions will follow in due course. He went on to explain that the display screens in The Street will be moving over to a new system. This will include a new back-end, hardware and clients. He also explained that WSUS will be going away. It is not doing what it should be and was only needed for reporting, that will be covered by Tanium going forward.

RM - queried WSUS retirement impact

DP - expects none, as it is not a widely known about service. He went on explain that the Verex door-access system is due for replacement and not merely decommissioning.

MS - noted that Verex replacement will not support obsolete white cards or key fobs. Only a University card or purple card can be used.

DP - will investigate if there is any need to keep the Remote Desktop (desktop.cl.cam.ac.uk), especially some needs may have vanished (printing, password changes, Adobe products).

MS - stated that legacy e-mail-to-filer is mostly decommissioned, with only a few edge cases left.

RM - stated the need for some encouragement, then the decision can be passed to the HoD.

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MS - proposes that the managed wikis are switched off with no direct replacement. Content cannot be migrated automatically, so responsibility lies with owners. Ideally this is done as soon as is practical due to OS obsolescence and security risk. The same applies for trac hosts and old Subversion repos. He went on to explain that the Model data-centre cluster is 11 years old and effectively obsolete; costly to run. Teaching HoD supports purchasing small dedicated hardware for courses that truly need it.

RM - recommended meeting users of the ageing model data centre cluster to clarify real requirements before spending on new hardware.

MS - stated that replacement will be expensive, but many users may just need a machine. He further noted that the HoD supports hardware replacement for teaching. He went on to explain that licence server VMs previously supported by IT Services are fragile and don't work well, with many licences now long expired. He has shut down servers that with licenses that have lapsed five years ago and suggested that future VMs should be owned and maintained by the research groups themselves.

RM stated that weather station requires someone to take on the responsibility. He went on to suggest a discussion with The Departmental Secretary regarding the management of ACS HPC access to decide who should carry it out, as it is mostly administrative and not technical.

ACTION

DP and MS to update the committee on progress of decommissioning legacy services. Including the potential decommissioning of old printers (DP), desktop.cl.cam.ac.uk (DP) and the managed Wikis (MS).

6. Main business

(i) Software Licensing (MATLAB and others)

RM – suggested that this discussion is deferred to a future meeting due to time restraints.

SC - confirmed that MATLAB licence funding is no longer urgent because UIS will cover costs “until further notice.”

(ii) Tanium Rollout

DP - reported that Tanium has been rolled out to all servers; the same deployment process will soon be applied to domain-joined devices.

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(iii) Review of ITSC Terms of Reference

RM - proposed updating the committee's Terms of Reference, to meet twice per term and formally appoint the CST ITSC chair as the CST representative on the SoT ITSC.

The committee approved the action.

(iv) Email Retention Policy

MS - raised a concern that the new e-mail policy could be interpreted as ending "alumni-for-life" addresses under cam.ac.uk, or specifically sub-domains (cst, cl), which can currently be forwarded to external addresses.

RM - believes UIS once offered a forwarding service that departments never adopted, though does not expressly forbid the department to forward email. He has asked UIS to clarify current policy.

MS - stated that policy still allows accounts for associates who actively contribute to the University's mission, and visitors could qualify under that clause, though forwarding was his main concern.

7. Any Other Business

(i) GPU Use Statistics

SN - enquired whether usage statistics from the MPhil and research groups on their take-up of the Lightning GPU service would be useful.

NL agreed and requested usage numbers.

SN - agreed to follow up.

MS - offered to bring up usage metrics of HPC cluster vs. GPU VMs to future meetings. He observed a smaller take up of GPU VMs by MPhils that expected, with many using HPC.

8. Date of next meeting(s)

RM - informed the committee that he would be unavailable for the next scheduled meeting on Tuesday, 17th June 2025.

Consequently, the committee agreed to reschedule the meeting to Monday, 23rd June 2025, maintaining the same start time and location, with a 1.5 hour scheduled duration.

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Date: 23rd June 2025

Time: 14:00 - 15:30

Location: SW00