

DUC (Departmental User's Committee) Meeting held on 6th May 2009

Present:

(Chair) Dr Peter D Haynes (PDH)
Dr David Colling (DC)
Dr Michael Barrett (MB)
Mr Arthur Spirling (AS)
Mr Saul Batzofin (SB)
Prof Alan Boobis (AB)
Mr Simon A Burbidge (SAB)
Dr John Shemilt (JS)
Mr David Botschinsky (DB)
Mr Duncan C White (CDW)
Dr Gerard Gorman (GG)
Mr Paul Allatt (PA)
Dr Fusun Nadiri (FN)
Mr David J Winstanley (DJW)
Dr Dan Moore (DM)
Mrs Tracey van Zyl (TvZ)

Reader, Materials & Physics
Lecturer, E-Science, High Energy Physics Group, Physics, FoNS
Senior Lecturer, Head of Learning Resources, FoM
Director, ICT
Infrastructure Programme Manager, ICT
Investigative Science
HPC Manager, ICT
Head, Technology Operations, ICT
Kennedy Inst. of Rheumatology (FoM)
Unix Systems Programmer, Dept of Computing
Research Fellow, Dept Earth Science & Engineering
Link Manager, ICT
Computer Manager, Dept of Mech Eng
IT Services Manager, Electric & Electronic Eng
Reader, Computational Applied Mathematics
(Secretary), EA to Arthur Spirling

Apologies:

Prof Denis Wright (DW)
Dr Letty Foulkes (LF)

Prof Pest Management, Biology, FoNS
Research/Teaching Computing Officer & Tutor for women (UG)
Aeronautics
Chair: Computational Materials Science, Dept Chemistry
Lecturer, Computational Bioinformatics, SORA

Prof Nicholas Harrison (NH)
Mr Timothy Ebbels (TE)

1. Introductions/Apologies

PDH welcomed DC as the new representative from Physics. Mr Saul Batzofin (SB) was welcomed for item 4. below.

2. Notes of previous meeting

DM requested that the minutes be amended to correctly reflect that although he did not attend the previous meeting, he did send a deputy, Dr Niall Adams. (Done).

3. Matters Arising/Actions

- 3.a. GSEPS – AS to follow up with Dick Kitney and Julia Buckingham in a few months , as there is a review about this process.
- 3.b. FoNS IT Strategy Committee – PA had met with Bob Cummins, who said he intended to resurrect the FoNS IT Strategy Committee.

4. College Search Engine Update

SB gave the members an update. In summary;

- The Web Management Board, who oversee and prioritise web projects agreed with the general view that our current search, Ultraseek, was generating very poor results. Ultraseek is an end of life product so no new developments will be undertaken by the supplier. The WMB therefore felt there was little benefit in putting a lot of effort into tuning Ultraseek and that a replacement search should be selected and implemented. Our briefing was to evaluate search products, but in addition to the standard key word search functionality, we were also asked to look at products which had additional capabilities such as results clustering and taxonomy generation.
- Although there are very impressive products out there that have these capabilities, such as Autonomy Idol, they are incredibly expensive. Given the current budget situation we recommended to the Web Management Board that this additional capability was nice to have rather than must have. They agreed and accepted our recommendation to purchase a Googlebox which has now happened and we are in the process of implementing it to

replace Ultraseek. Before going live with it we need to investigate the best and most cost effective way of including permission based content into the search results. There are a variety of ways of achieving this ranging in complexity. This investigation is in progress and we should have identified the various options within the next few weeks and once that decision is made we will be working on the actual go-live, targeted to happen by July dependant on the permission based content decision.

- DM asked if the local Google will feed internet Google results from outside College? SB replied that 'Enterprise Search' searches our content, and there is no connection with external Google. PDH asked how often its index will refresh (show new pages and delete those not in existence anymore). SB said that he was unsure for Google. For Ultraseek the revisit rate defaults to 15 days, but if a page's content changes often the revisit cycle gets shorter whereas if it never changes the revisit cycle could go out to 45 days. SB to check what the revisit policy is on our Google box.
- SB confirmed that Google will give information on popular searches, but would also return words with no search results e.g. 'employment' – when people are looking for 'jobs', which could then be added to a synonyms table helping to create a more usable website. Google allows sub-searches to be created based on urls's e.g. Chemistry and appropriate research groups could have their own sub-search.
- Regarding the free Google service for academic institutions, SB clarified that on the free service there was no permission based content e.g. some HR pages need to be protected, and it is only indexed to a certain level, i.e. would not index the deeper more detailed content on the ICT website for example. College have only bought one Google box, if it fails we will use 'free' Google as the backup service. Google do not allow physical access to the server which is locked, so the product cannot be customised beyond the configuration options provided by Google. SB reported that 11 of the Russell Group universities are using Google possible because Google's HE offering is very inexpensive now.
- PDH asked who departmental web staff should approach for search problems. SB replied that the web team can be approached or calls can be logged via the service desk and will be forwarded to the appropriate resolution group, either within ICT or Communications who are the business owners of College search.
- GG asked about last minute forcing of indexing for new pages – will this be faster? SB said he would have to check as he wasn't sure what Google's revisit policy was and whether indexing on a specific page could be forced.

5. Directors Report

AS gave a brief report –

- The PRB have approved the re-submitted HPC proposal, consequently CO2 cooling is going through the procurement stage, with the new kit due to arrive by 30th September 09.
- The Support Services recruitment freeze is occupying much of AS's time. The effect of the freeze is containable now, but in the future if critical people leave, is likely to prove challenging. ICT has asked to seek dispensation for student labour (mostly PG's) who work in the Service Desk. As yet, NARC has apparently not approved any special recruitment appeals from Support Services
- SEQ is taking up a lot of ICT's time, as are Estates projects in general (Hammersmith, L & J block).
- ICT is still looking for a 2nd Data Centre location. The option of combining forces with AHSC looks bleak as they have budgetary issues. There was some discussion around possible location of a datacentre within DoC, but it wasn't certain whether Huxley and Blackett owners would have a different view. DM and DC will have a separate discussion re DoC space. Many estates/project plans regarding space are 'up in the air' at the moment. The SEQ project affects all building moves and the deadline for completion of this is likely to be later than expected. Communication about estates/space plans is not consistent
- Most time however, has been spent on planning and budgets.

6. Protecting Research Data

An internal audit is about to commence on 'Disaster Recovery in Research Departments'. The auditors may make recommendations for improvement – which they follow up on a year later. This may raise the profile of protecting Research Data amongst management, although ownership of this is not clear. Different aspects of College are looking at this in (possibly) fragmented ways e.g. ITSSG, Faculty IT Committees, DUC, Research Committee etc.

A coherent strategy is needed. It should probably be owned by Research (as it protects IP and college efforts/reputation and ultimately grants) and supported by ICT. A strategy may need to be customised for each Faculty/Department/Divisional strategy, as a college-wide solution is not feasible and is unlikely to be adopted. The strategy would include DR and archiving and give an idea of current practices and issues. PDH asked for volunteers to draft a brief document of suggested best practice guidelines, GG, PA, DW and DB volunteered. The report will be sent to ITSSG for them to steer in the appropriate direction.

DM said this issue should be regarded similar to Health and Safety i.e. part of the everyday activity in the Research community. This would require strong support from the Rector, requesting Faculties to consult with ICT on their particular needs.

DB asked how ICT can help? JS replied that the customer needs to tell ICT what its requirements are, so that ICT can investigate e.g. does data need to be kept eternally. Archiving involves having to transfer data to different media formats every few years as software/hardware becomes obsolete. ICT is looking into the different types of options available so that when customers indicate their requirements, ICT can give advice accordingly.

The Research Council require archiving and data curation. Historically College has never invested in archiving (except DoC who had their own service). AS said that Jean Sykes from UKRDS has issued a final report on a national facility related to this. They initially proposed one centre, but decided a multi-centre solution was the only viable option. Finance for this was a big issue as it would cost millions, and it may not happen now. UKRDS are also mostly interested in archiving from a cataloguing/librarians point of view. It was agreed it would be better to get agreement on College best practice before looking further afield.

Action: Smaller group to draft strategy document with best practice guidelines, for ITSSG. (PDH, GG, PA, DW, DB)

7. ICT Planning and Budget

AS talked through the planning papers provided, and explained that at the beginning of the planning round we had our customers 'like to have' requirements, however, as the financial situation has worsened this has changed to 'have to have' requirements. ICT was requested to reduce the budget by 5% although costs will rise by 11% on last year. 17 posts have been saved by natural wastage. One third of the Business Solutions contractors have left. AS has also met with Stephen Richardson (FP FOE), and Philip Blissett (FOO FOM), to present ICT's plan and discuss a further 5% cut. ICT is waiting to hear feedback on the submissions so far. The approved budget's will probably only be confirmed in August.

A few points:

- The 'Strategic Themes' part of the documentation shows customers requirements in priority order.
- There is unlikely to be any AV/room support, there was an initiative for room managers, but funds are short.
- New builds will have voice-over IP installed, which saves duplication of cables etc. The third floor in Sheffield will be trialled next. There are discussions about Faculty Building and Brompton campus.
- Engineering have asked for a course management system, which ICT's Business Systems staff are looking at. Several researchers have asked for assistance with Oracle databases.

- The Rector is keen to have information easily available, which ICT's 'Business Intelligence' stream is working on, a dashboard has been produced.
- Patient data, and working with the AHSC has implications on networking zoning and data security.
- AS is looking for more academic representation on ICT's governance boards.
- The £/\$/€ devaluation means that the hardware renewal budgets have been cut, so renewal of staff desktops will be 5-yearly instead of 4-yearly, and renewal of screens will be 6-yearly. There is an average 12% inflation on software/hardware which is difficult to assimilate.
- ICT's project deadlines will be affected with fewer resources, especially contractors. Staff will have to take on additional work, resulting in disruptions when there is sickness, leave etc. All projects will have their timescales reviewed. The focus for the next few years will be on keeping things running, and gaining the benefits out of what we have, instead of introducing new projects.

8. HPC Procurement update

SAB reported that ICT will now be able to purchase additional cooling equipment for the machine room, required for new HPC equipment, though there are likely to be timing issues with the delivery of new HPC kit. SAB is looking at how this will affect the service. The cooling being bought now will last for 15 years.

SAB has received replies from 8 vendors to tender, the HPC Steering Committee will meet to review tenders, recommendations, and decide on the successful bidder within the next 2-3 weeks. As suppliers won't guarantee their price for more than a month, purchasing are assisting - though finding the process timelines challenging. It is not the best time to buy with the current exchange rate, although a new Intel CPU is available which looks very interesting. Research Groups can use their funding to expand the system and add new hardware.

The user questionnaire is still up on the webpage for ideas and suggestions, but will close soon.

9. AOB

Disability support - DB asked how College supports users with disabilities. AS replied that as different disabilities require different software/hardware it is not cost effective to have specialised setups on every computer, as the license costs would be very high (software especially is expensive and seems to go out of date quickly). College once had a room set aside specifically for disabled users, but this was deemed inappropriate as it did not convey the right impression. Now users are given the particular hardware/software needed for their own computer/laptop etc - this works well and is cost effective. College now has 2 disability officers who seem swamped with requests, it seems difficult to get resources to support disabled users. It is the Faculty/Institutions responsibility to fund any special disability purchases. Sometimes the local council will give a grant refunding the cost of this for students.

JISC funded initiatives - MB mentioned there was a JISC grant for working on a student feedback system. AS replied that he was not in favour of the JISC initiatives as they take up a large amount of time and never produce an actual product. ICT tends to be ahead of many HE institutions e.g. having one login for most systems. Occasionally JISC run a project which ICT can take advantage of, if it is what we want/need to do e.g. Shibboleth.

10. Next Meeting

DUC should track and pre-empt ITSSG's agenda so that DUC can influence and contribute towards strategic ideas and then get feedback. PH requested that future dates be set up halfway through each term, (not over summer) and that the Agendas for DUC/ITSSG to be copied to each other ahead of each meeting.

The next two meetings are:

Wednesday 11 November 2pm (venue tbc)

Wednesday 17 February 2pm (venue tbc).