

Department of Computer Science

Minutes of Staff/Student Meeting

Monday 13 August 2012

R561, Level 5, Science Centre

Present:

Staff: Paul Denny (Chair), Nevil Brownlee, Ann Cameron, Adriana Ferraro, Sean Davidson and Sithra Sukumaar

Students: Saurabh Sood(101), Leron Gittens-Arnold (101), Ben Davies (105, 225), Ashley Noel Hirton (210), Faizev Hussein (220), Timothy Diack (230), Priyal Bangia (230), John Douglas (314/335), Nick Stones-Havas (340), Chris Riddell (340), JJ Blucher (367), Ben Skudder (707) and Stephen Hood (750)

Apologies:

Staff: Robert Sheehan, Robert Amor, Angela Chang

Students: Tina Pan (225), Sam Pearson (111), Sharon Middleton (111/111G) and Uhyoung Choi (111)

If you attended the meeting and your name does not appear above, you did not fill out the attendance sheet as requested.

1) Welcome

Paul welcomed all the class representatives, outlined their responsibilities, and thanked them for volunteering to represent their peers. A selection of chocolate biscuits was available, with Tim-Tams proving the most popular.

2) HoD report

- Prof Pat Langley has started in the Department
- Ian Watson has been invited to be on the Turing Centenary Advisory Committee of The Alan Turing Year
- There is a laptop loan scheme in place for students. Students can borrow a laptop for up to 2 hrs from the Student Resource centre.
- Patricia sent out 434 letters and 168 certificates to students who received an A-, A or A+ in our courses in semester 1.
- According to FoS figures, enrolments are up from last year.

### 3) Technical report

Sean Davidson presented the technical report, which is always the highlight of the meeting. The following were the main points:

As most are aware, there have been major problems with the SONAS file storage system with 3 outages already this semester. The vendor has been onsite for 2 months to analyse and hopefully fix the problem. Many of the issues were related to the fact that Firefox browser histories were being stored on SONAS.

If any issues arise in the future, students can submit a Remedy request by opening a browser in the lab and click the red button that appears in the top corner of the Science home page to submit a job.

According to the lab usage statistics, there is still capacity available. A comparison of the usage "heat maps" from the same time last year show that peak usage now is currently in the 90-95% consumption rate rather than the 95-100% consumption rate. Although there does appear to be capacity, actually locating a free machine can sometimes be a problem - Sean mentioned again that a nearly-completed project which aimed to help students locate available machines was put on hold when the developer left on extended leave.

Virtualised desktops and applications appear to be the way of the future, allowing students to use all necessary software from their own machines, but there are still

licensing issues to be sorted out. Having said that, a large fraction of the software used in Computer Science courses is available for free.

#### 4) Elect representatives

The following students were elected as representatives on the Faculty Staff/Student Consultative Committee:

Undergrad: Timothy Diack (230) and Saurabh Sood (101) - with Ben Davies (105) acting as a stand-in if necessary

Postgrad: Ben Skudder (707)

#### 5) Student use of Facebook/YouTube on lab machines

A discussion around the use of non-work related systems (Facebook and YouTube being the notable examples) on lab machines consumed most of the meeting time. One key decision is whether a technical solution should be employed to prevent students from accessing these tools (whether in all labs or just some labs). This idea had been first raised some time ago, and Sean reported that it had been discussed at the Faculty level. Although at this staff/student meeting possible technical solutions were proposed (such as blocking network access to the sites, or allowing access for short periods of time), the result of the previous Faculty of Science meeting (which included Margaret Goldstone, Sean Davidson and Andrew Cranna-Powell) concluded that technical solutions would not be employed, but rather the Faculty wanted to appeal to students to be respectful of one another and avoid non-work related use of lab machines when the labs were busy. Technical solutions are also complicated by the fact that some courses use Facebook and YouTube (notably Tuakana uses a Facebook group) formally. During Semester 1, the Faculty circulated announcements to be made in class to remind students of this. This should be repeated again this semester.

Whether these have any effect is very subjective. At least one class rep felt that use of Facebook/YouTube in the labs was worse in Semester 1, Sean felt the situation had actually worsened this semester. This may also be related to course workloads, and possibly when assignment deadlines become more frequent, non-work related

use reduces. One class rep suggested that more, or more difficult, assignments could be the answer!

Sean mentioned that when he has asked students to stop using Facebook in the lab, they usually have their work open in another window indicating that Facebook is being used as a break/distraction from work.

A good, and simple idea to remind students to be respectful in their use of lab machines would be to show a splash-page on log in.

While using Facebook or watching videos on YouTube is possibly a poor use of student time (and interfering with the productivity and learning), the laptop loan scheme continues to be under-utilised so there are avenues for students to find machines if they need them.

This discussion, which was initially targetted around resource/machine availability, then focussed on the increasing reliance of students on Facebook groups rather than the Computer Science forums for getting help from one another. Some courses even had multiple groups on Facebook, set up by different students. This fragmentation is not ideal, because a Q&A forum works best when all students have access to the same content (and particularly when the best students are able to help out other students).

One approach, which had been taken in CS220, was that the lecturer would send responses to individual student questions to all students via Cecil announcements.

Some class reps felt that the department should publish guidelines for the appropriate use of Facebook groups - if students preferred to use Facebook to communicate rather than the CS forums. One concern is that this might show the department endorses the use of Facebook, however the reality is that many students are familiar with the interface and are logged in frequently, so prefer to use Facebook. Another concern is that posts on Facebook groups are not moderated by staff, and thus are particularly susceptible to contain content that could be used for plagiarism of assessed coursework. It is recommended that the department should consider what level of support to provide for course-related Facebook use. Simply ignoring it may not be the best course of action.

## 6) General business

The class rep for a Stage 3 course raised the issue of a tutor for that course not having adequate knowledge or preparation. This feedback was passed on to the lecturer by the class rep, which was the right course of action. Although tutors do receive some generic training, in most cases lecturers select the tutors for their course and it is important for lecturers to select tutors with appropriate backgrounds.

A student using CodeWrite in COMPSCI 101 indicated they would prefer to see more helpful error messages produced by the tool. Currently, CodeWrite displays just the raw compiler messages, but a useful addition to the tool would be more targeted and in-depth explanations when errors occur. This is likely to be an ongoing development/research project.

At least one of the recorded lectures for COMPSCI 101 showed the wrong screen during a portion of the recording. The cause is that in PLT1, there are two projection screens, and when the lecturer displays a different image in each, although their commentary may make sense to the students present in class, this may not be the case for students just watching the recordings. As more and more students rely on the recorded lectures, it is important for lecturers to ensure they record the appropriate screens.

The CS210 rep also noted that of the 3 lectures per week, only 2 are held in rooms where recording is an option. This has been frustrating for some students who like the recordings. If possible, it would be good to have recording equipment available more frequently, or to schedule as many classes as possible in rooms that are equipped.

In a recent CS101 class, a web-based system was trialled which performed similar functionality to "clickers" but where students would vote using any networked device with a browser. From purely anecdotal feedback, the number of students who responded using this web-based system was not dissimilar to the number who would have responded in a class where clickers are used.

CS105 students in the large lecture theatres in the Owen G Glenn building (F&PAA and 260-098) noticed an annoying clicking sound throughout there recent classes. The cause is not known.

See you all on 8th October 2012