Department of Computer Science

Minutes of Staff/Student Meeting

Monday 26 March 2012

Present:

Staff: Paul Denny (Chair), Robert Amor, Robert Sheehan, Adriana Ferraro, Ann Cameron, Angela Chang, Sithra Sukumaar, Sean Davidson, Henry Guo, Pan Hu

Students: James Taylor (101), Yanjin He (101), Pooja Yeligala (105), Mina Ross (111/111G), Timothy Diack (210,215), Siddarth Dave (215), Jeong Su Jeon (215), John Douglas (220,230), Kewei Jiang (225, 230), Nick Stones-Halves (225), Yutaz Xerxes Saher (345), Shengyang (Jack) Luo (369), Frederick JJ Blucher (373), Aswin Ramakrishna (734), Andrew Wilson(767/773),Camille Nicodemus (771)

Apologies:

Staff:

Students: David Casperson (351), Pooja Bangia (210)

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.

2) HoD report

 - Our enrolments have remained strong for S1 2012.

 - We had our annual review with the Dean, including a discussion about red-flagged courses. Paul reminded reps that the course evaluations are treated very seriously, and courses with poor evaluations are investigated by Faculty

- We have advertised for two new lecturers, so there will shortly be additional academic staff in the department

3) Technical report

Sean Davidson presented the technical report. The following were the main points:

 - the lab image has been changed from 32-bit to 64-bit Windows. Initial testing had indicated a huge improvement in performance (in part due to the recent investment in additional RAM for the lab machines).

 - unfortunately, there have been major problems (acknowledged by ITS) with the new File storage system. It is likely that these problems will be ongoing for a while until the problems are sorted out with the vendors.

 - Sean noted that enrolments were up in other departments as well, and this has exacerbated the lack of computers available in the labs (there has been approximately a 1/3 decrease in the number of machines available)

 - to offset the computer shortage, Faculty have invested in 40 laptops which can be hired out from SciSpace (in a similar fashion to library book lending) free of charge. Laptops can be hired between 9am and 4pm for 2 hour periods, which can be extended for an additional 2 hours online. The laptops have all of the software available in the lab. The uptake has so far been slow, but has increased recently with additional publicity. Sean indicated that the Faculty would consider investing in more laptops if this service became popular (which is far less expensive the maintaining lab space). The laptops do not currently have the Linux image, but can be used to connect to the login servers.

4) Elect representatives

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

 UG reps: Tim Diack and Siddarth Dave

 PG rep: Ashwin Ramakrishna

In addition, there were three volunteers for the position of rep on the CS department Academic Committee:

 AC reps: JJ Blucher, John Douglas and Jack Luo

The selected rep will be chosen shortly.

5) Shortage of computers

In several previous Staff/Student meetings, an issue with students using lab machines to access non work-related courses (Facebook being the most problematic) was raised. This has now become an extreme problem due to the shortage of machines (see Sean's report above). Not only is this a problem in the open (casual-use) areas of the lab, but has become an increasing problem in closed labs during tutorial sessions. It was difficult for the lab tutors to identify which students should be in the closed lab - and some machines were being used for facebook and other non-course related activity by students not enrolled in the lab stream.

A good discussion followed, including ideas for blocking access to certain sites. A problem with this approach, noted by several student reps, was that some sites (YouTube in particular) was often used for course or learning related activities. Consensus was that facebook was the primary problem, and a way to prevent students from using lab machines to access facebook (whether a technical solution or greater policing in the labs) is now urgent.

Another idea to help student find available machines was to implement a system similar to a parking building, that would show how many computers were free in each of the labs. This information could be displayed on the large LCD monitors installed near the labs. Sean reported that in fact a programmer had been working on just this problem, and was very close to implementing a solution that could be used - however the programmer has just taken extended leave and the project is on hold until a replacement can be found.

6) General business

There was a reminder that GCL is the "quiet lab" and reports are that it has been working quite well as a quiet space this semester.

One student rep noticed that SSHing to the login servers was extremely slow (sometimes taking more than 30 seconds to echo a keystroke). Although the rep noticed this issue prior to the meeting, Sean reported that it had been intermittently a problem over the last few weeks. At times, there was a lot of broadcast traffic on the network and very high latency across the University. SIT are fully aware of the problem, and are working to find a solution.

There were a couple of complaints regarding the teaching style in certain paper-based tutorial sessions. In particular, in some sessions where the students were working on problems, the tutor would not prepare any material or prompt any discussion, but was available if students wanted to ask questions. Students appear very hesitant to ask questions so there is no interaction with the tutor, and little progress is made during the hour. Paul suggested in the first instance the lecturers of the course should be informed (as this had not yet taken place) to get a clarification of the lecturer's expectations over how the tutorials should be run. Other ideas were for students to become more proactive in asking questions. Some reps noted that students were often very shy to ask questions in front of their peers.

One rep noted that Computer Science forums were very much under-used, and this reduced their value. Staff have definitely noted a trend of reduced forum usage over the last few years. One contributing factor was likely to be the fact that many course-related discussions are now held on facebook, albeit in a more fragmented way and not accessible to all students. Class reps indicated it would be better if students were encouraged to use the forums more often, so that all students could benefit. One objection to the forums was that responses could often be slow, and there were no notifications, when help was needed urgently. There is apparently a feature in which you can configure the forum software to notify you (via email) of any updates to a particular thread. However, this did not seem to be the default setting, and it wasn't clear if this feature was supported by the version of the forum software that was running.

On behalf of Honours students, one rep noted that the timing of the orientation session (which was held 3 weeks into the semester) was not optimal. Many Hons

students felt unsure and anxious in the first few weeks of semester. It was suggested that a much better time to run an orientation/information session would be late the previous year. In addition, Hons students did not seem to have any additional support from the department - particularly in terms of access to computers - but instead had to fight for a machine in the (now heavily used) remaining lab space. This particular rep, along with several class mates, has recently discussed the situation with Gill who is looking in to the matter. Sean volunteered to help, specifically in terms of offering computer access to Hons students.

Not all lecturers are recording lectures, even in rooms where the facility is available. At this stage, it was suggested that the best course of action was for reps to ask the lecturers concerned if they would be willing to have their lectures recorded. Recording is currently at the discretion of the individual lecturer, however the process is extremely simple.