

# IT Computing Review Phase 2: Further Questions

## School of Informatics Response

1 June 2007

### 1 School and College Computing Strategies

*(i) Do you agree that more information on School IT strategies and major planning decisions should rise to College and University level in order to identify common themes and general concerns, consider opportunities for efficiency gains, and monitor implementation of agreed policies?*

Yes. However, it is the case that many of the issues that concern Informatics (eg unix-based services, cluster computing) are of less interest beyond the College. And previous experience of inputting college priorities into university level planning has not always been positive. Thus it may make most sense to focus on commonalities at the college level. Top-down “monitoring” of school computing strategy and planning is unlikely to lead overall efficiency gains: for example, in Informatics the direct link between the Informatics computing service and research groups is very important, and a degree of flexibility is required to meet rapidly changing research needs.

*(ii) The College Review Group proposes to recommend that the School representative on CC&ITC should convene the relevant School IT Strategy Group and should have a seat on the School Executive Group. Comments invited. Would it be desirable (through consideration of best practice) to develop a template remit for School IT Strategy Groups?*

This is the case in Informatics. It would certainly be useful to share best practice and to exchange information at the college level. Whether a “template remit” is possible, or desirable, is unclear, since school computing strategies must be closely linked school research and teaching needs.

*(iii) Is there merit in trying to develop an explicit College IT strategy? In the interests of optimizing Schools’ input to such a strategy, is there merit in developing a template for School IT strategies? It was felt that these suggestions might significantly assist the flows of information necessary to develop well-informed and coherent strategy at all levels.*

The first step is probably to develop computing strategies for the schools in the college! There is an opportunity to exchange information in this process via CCPAG and CC&ITC, and it is likely strategic discussions at this level will be more productive for the college than the sometimes futile effort to influence the university’s IT and Computing priorities.

If a college computing strategy is to have an actual effect, beyond white papers, then it will require an explicit resourcing model, rather than relying on goodwill from schools.

### 2 Variations in IT staff per school

*(i) Has there been any recent analysis of IT business requirements and mode of delivery leading to an objective decision that the current level of support and IT staff profile are optimal. If so, how was this done and are there any lessons that other schools might learn?*

The Informatics Computing Service underwent an organizational restructuring last year, following an analysis of the best way to meet the school's computing requirements. One of the results of this restructuring is a specific unit concerned with computing requirements specific to research projects, and we have developed a FEC-type resource model to make the link between computing recharge from grants and computing work done more explicit. We are also developing a new process for school-wide consultations on specific major computing projects (most recently: content management systems for research institutes).

Technical excellence (in an ever-increasing range of technologies) is the most important requirement for our computing staff. The technical profile of senior computing staff is much better than we could hope to recruit (when we advertised for a principal computing officer at AD5 in 2005, there were no applicants that were suitable for interview, despite the use of two recruitment agencies). We can recruit technically excellent junior staff (often from other universities) due to the technically strong and innovative environment that we are able to provide.

*(ii) How do Schools assess the risks to their critical services due to their being run by small numbers of staff, ie with limited backup?*

No service is critically dependent on an individual. We minimize risks by standardizing operating procedures, documentation, and automation. Automating system administration and management tasks—an activity in which we are in the forefront internationally—is an extremely practical way of simultaneously improving services, adding robustness, and minimizing risk.

Certain aspects of the design and development of new and innovative services are more dependent on individuals, largely due to individuals with specialist technical excellence (eg authentication, networking). One of our current aims, which also reinforces staff development, is to disseminate this technical expertise more widely across the Informatics Computing Service. Our ability to continue doing this relies on us being able to attract strongly technical junior staff.

### **3 Staff roles**

*(i) What is the scope for some form of greater co-operation between Schools for the provision of facilities/services which are accepted as too specialised to be centrally provided by IS?*

There is scope for cooperation concerning unix services such as configuration management (LCFG), secure distributed filesystems, and printing, and in services resulting from computationally demanding research, such as distributed computing systems (eg Condor). CCPAG has a key role here. For such cooperation to work a resourcing model is required, since it currently relies of goodwill of computing staff in schools.

### **4 Communication between IS and School staff**

*(i) Do we need significantly greater mobility of IT staff between central and School IT roles? If so, how could this be achieved?*

This is an issue that we wish to approach with caution. The main reason that Informatics has a large computing service is to support and maintain excellence in our research activities. This requires computing staff with an understanding of the needs of our researchers, and the ability to provide directed support. Realistically, if it was felt that computing support was inadequate for the needs of our researchers, we would see an increasing shift of what are now tasks performed by Informatics computing staff taken on by research staff as part of their project duties.

However, we believe there are routes to develop greater collaboration, but that these should be approached on a project basis. In this case there may be scope for secondments of Informatics staff to work on an IS project, or IS staff (or staff from other schools in the College) to work on or transfer an Informatics project or new service.

## 5 Non-staffing issues

(All questions directed to CCPAG)

## 6 Duplication

*(ii) Do you agree that more coordination is needed in the identification, development, and roll-out of innovative services? Recognizing that there may be limits on IS capacity to support mainstream activity, would there be support for greater collaboration with IS in the local development of special services which may eventually have wider applicability?*

Yes — but we need to take fast-changing research needs into account. As mentioned above greater collaboration with IS on special services is something we would welcome. Last year, Tim Colles of Informatics was partially seconded to the ECDF project; we would welcome IS secondments to Informatics, for example in the area of LCFG.

*(iii) Is there a continuing need for an IS User Support Unit operated from the support available in Schools?*

Historically we have used the IS user support unit in a very minimal way, because of our low use of central services.

However, as we move towards using more central services for commodity purposes (mail, web, eDiary, WebCT etc), we will need to make more use of IS support. We will maintain a single point of contact for computing support for members of the school, with Informatics staffing fronting queries about the central services we use, passing things on to IS user support where appropriate.

## 7 Service definitions and performance indicators

*(i) Is the School getting “value for money” for its own IT services, and how does it know?*

The role of Informatics computing is to support the School’s research and teaching activities, so the most important way to measure value for money is in terms of our RAE rating (and also teaching-related metrics). More specifically, our recent revision to research computing support, which is more in line with FEC approaches, has provided much greater transparency in computing. It is also the case that our research computing activities have recently undergone audit in the context of several large EC projects.

*(ii) Would some form of KPI or other information help to inform strategy and planning*

We already collect objective data about the work of Informatics Computing Service. Each of the five units provides a quarterly report, which includes proportions of staff time spent on various activities, projects undertaken, etc. This data is used to inform strategy, and management: for example, consistently

lower proportions of time spent on development activities (due to operational demands) than planned can be identified, and emphases changed.

We also collect objective data (such as statistics on time taken to respond to support tickets) but are sceptical that such data gives a rich insight into strategy.

*(iii) Would it be desirable to develop a recommended template for Service Definitions or Service Level Agreements if a broadly applicable methodology could be determined through consideration of best practice?*

It is certainly desirable to share best practice through CC&ITC and CCPAG. It must be borne in mind that different schools have very different computing requirements. Within Informatics there is a stable and well-established system for the collection, negotiation and delivery of computing requirements for teaching. For research, we are transitioning to a revised system, based on a basic level of recharge per researcher, in return for which certain services (eg disk space, network connectivity, cluster computing usage) are provided.

## 8 Procurement

*(i) How should IS, Colleges and Schools implement the requirements of the McClelland report?*

We are concerned that IT equipment will be seen as solely “commodity” and that ever more centralized procurement will constrain our teaching and research delivery.

For McClelland, “Best Value” is the most important criteria, but for us to ensure that excellence in researching and teaching is not compromised “Best Fit” must be *our* most important criteria. The more remote from researchers procurement decisions are taken, the less chance for achieving best fit for purpose.

There absolutely must be recognition that not all IT is based on Windows platform. This has been hard enough to get recognized at University level—how much harder might it be to get recognized at a National level?

There is a real danger that McClelland will *increase* the level of non-contracted purchases as research groups find that the Nationally agreed contracts do not meet their requirements.

*(ii) How can the University prevent purchases from non-contracted suppliers?*

In Informatics, we have a centralized purchasing service, close to our academics: this gives advise on equipment specifications and suitability, obtains quotes, and orders the goods on behalf of the academic. This ensures that the School purchases from contract suppliers wherever possible, and that equipment is entered into the central school inventory and insurance schedules (where appropriate). This service also manages software and hardware maintenance.

Equipment is primarily purchased from non contract suppliers when there is no contracted supplier for that class of equipment. The university would benefit from proactive monitoring of spending, by technology literate staff, to identify common classes of equipment for which there is no contracted supplier.

*(iii) How should the University address the related issues of asset control, physical equipment security and equipment disposal?*

There is clear potential for a university wide inventory system. This would be particularly useful if it were linked to the central finance purchasing systems. However, many schools have existing inventory

systems - an effective requirements capture would have to be performed to maximize buyin to a central service. For example, Informatics would require some link to our LCFG managed platform technology.

*(iv) How should the University take forward the recommendations in BRS sections 6.1.6 and the proposals in BRS section 6.2?*

A better understanding of IT technologies by procurement would be extremely beneficial to the University, particularly in order to identify common classes of equipment for which there is no contracted supplier.

We support the proposal (6.1.6.1) of having someone with procurement expertise embedded within IS. However it is very important that this is a computing professional with procurement training, rather than a procurement professional with computing training.