

ICT Policy Committee

**Report of the Director of Computer Services
31 October 2007**

General Situation

ICT Services in the University are making progress. However we remain some distance from the goal of delivering excellent services to support an excellent University.

Since the Policy Committee last met a number of significant initiatives have come to fruition. Several have spanned multiple organisational boundaries in the University. Delivering successfully has required significant and constructive cooperation across those boundaries. Achieving this is no easy task in our fragmented organisation.

We continue to invest in the technology and systems needed to underpin the University's success. Much recent investment has been directed at filling obvious gaps and shortfalls. The emergence of our new ICT governance structures is creating an opportunity for us to direct investment on a strategically planned basis, although we also need to be responsive to the funding climate, which is often more short term than we would like.

We still face an enormous challenge to deliver the service excellence which the University community expects. It is very clear that we have some way to go. ICT management must find the focus to do two things well. Firstly we must find the detailed focus needed to substantially raise the standards of our service delivery processes. Secondly we must continue to plan and deliver a service development program which enables the University to continue to adapt to the changing world.

We must do this within resource constraints and against the background of continuing change in the University. Increasingly we are likely to direct our managerial and financial resources to mobilise talent inside and outside the University to assist us in delivering our internal changes and to enable our own people to focus on the needs of the University community which they know.

Governance

The current meeting will receive reports from the Standing Committee, from the Research Requirements Group and from the Architecture Working Group. We have also initiated the process of setting up a Teaching and Learning Requirements Group. These are, or will be, tangible outcomes from introducing our new governance structure.

The overall aim is to ensure that the University is able to drive the definition and delivery of the ICT services which it needs. This activity needs to be linked in turn University strategy. The Policy Committee, its standing committee and working groups are a key mechanism in achieving this.

Services Development and Delivery

One of the main challenges facing Computer Services is to meet the continuing service expectations of its customer base. To achieve this we must have robust mechanisms for understanding our customer needs and for delivering against them.

This translates into a need for much better planning, execution, reporting and monitoring processes within Computer Services as well as a need to find and mobilise the technical and leadership skills necessary to achieve effective delivery. We also need to ensure that the team is being asked to fully deliver to its existing capacity and the necessary monitoring and feedback mechanisms are in place to assist them in this.

We have made some progress since May with the creation of a Computer Services projects office function in the person of Sinéad Ní Fhaoláin. The role is to promote and develop the use of a standard approach to project delivery based on the PRINCE2 methodology. Critical elements at this stage include insistence on the production of written Project Initiation Documents and on a structured approach to project manpower planning, deliverables definition and identification of milestones and deadlines. We are also moving towards the introduction of a formal service management framework.

In both cases progress is slow and managers must make progress in the face of continuing operational issues, many of which could be avoided if the necessary frameworks were in place.

We do continue to make incremental progress in these areas. We are making processes more efficient; for instance our new wireless service has enabled us to discontinue the student “wireless clinics”. We are introducing a new Help Desk platform which will be a common resource for all ICT service providers. We are getting much better at providing new staff with computers. We are beginning to automate the monitoring of our systems. We are getting better at measuring what we do, with some examples presented here.

Nevertheless the importance of the move to a highly skilled and professionally disciplined organisation was demonstrated starkly in recent weeks when we suffered an extended outage on the University Web service. The technical detail will be published elsewhere, but the real underlying issues are the speed with which the project and service delivery disciplines can be embedded into Computer Services and the need to ensure that the right technical skills are applied appropriately.

Projects

The second main challenge facing Computer Services, and the other ICT service providers, is to continue to modernise the University’s infrastructure and services to adapt to changing circumstances. A number of key projects have made substantial progress, described below.

Blackboard Implementation The upgrade to the Blackboard Enterprise Edition was delivered in time for the start of the academic year. This project required substantial cooperation across organisational boundaries and was delivered by an enthusiastic and energetic project team. A formal project review is in hand to ensure that lessons are learned.

Wireless Service A substantial and successful investment in new wireless equipment and services has meant that we were able to launch the new wireless service for students and visitors in September. Detail of service uptake is reported elsewhere. The new service is much more secure and flexible, and can be provided to customers much more easily.

Network Remediation Historically the NUIG campus network grew without the benefit of an architectural design appropriate to a network of such a scale. As a result the need to invest in the network to the extent necessary to ensure reliable service across the campus was not identified. This situation has now been rectified and a programme of network upgrades is under way. The outcome for users is undramatic but significant; their network service works and can be forgotten about.

eMail Service Consolidation The move of staff and researchers to the MS Exchange platform is now almost complete. The service appears to have been well received across the campus. We look forward to finally switching off the Bodkin server. The team at DERI have been moved on to the University service from an outsourced service. We have invested in a product to support archiving eMail onto slower and cheaper storage. This will relieve pressure on server performance and storage capacity while providing users with an enhanced experience.

Desktop Computer Provision The University's desktop computer supply contracts are the subject of a current procurement exercise. We are using this to seek ways to promote greater technical and process standardisation across the University and remove complexity, cost and delay from the process of supplying and supporting desktop IT to the University.

We continue to work with the Registrar's Office and the HR Office to improve the operation of the "Registrar's Computer Scheme" under which most academic staff are provided with computers. We propose to modify this scheme to strongly encourage staff to select standardised computers under the procurement contracts.

PC Suite Renewals The annual renewal exercise this year faced additional challenges with an overdue upgrade of operating system (to Windows XP) and additional work to improve the processes and technical mechanism by which application software is distributed to the suites. Nevertheless software was upgraded on about 1400 computers and 300 computers in 13 suites were withdrawn and replaced.. We also provided the first suite for many years to utilise Apple computers.

There were some teething troubles, particularly with suites in Civil Engineering and Woodquay, and some issues continue.

Current Investments and Initiatives

Investment in the University's ICT infrastructure and services does need to continue. We are currently upgrading the main computer room power supply. We are also linking the existing computer room ("Computer Room South") to the computer room in DERI ("Computer Room North"). This will allow assets to be distributed between the two computer rooms, protecting the University against a number of potential failures.

A number of other initiatives are under way to deliver and extend services. These include the central infrastructure needed to support certain database services and an NUI Galway Identity Management System.

A successful bid was made by CISC under the HEA Research Equipment Renewal Grant to fund provision of a storage area network and virtual server facility. This will be integrated with existing Compute Services equipment and will provide the research community with secure and flexible ICT facilities.

A substantial contribution was made to the University's SIF Cycle 2 bid for systems which form part of the "Integrated Student Environment". This included a number of work packages (projects) which are likely to improve the student experience, and support student mobility. Certain projects, while aimed at students, will also improve services for teaching staff and researchers.

Kieran Loftus
Director of Computer Services
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