School of the Biological Sciences IT Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 12th June 2019, 2.15pm in Teaching Room 2, Department of Biochemistry

Present: Dr Mark Holmes (Chair), Mr Abbi Abbioui (Computer Officer, Department of Pharmacology), Dr Jenny Barna (Secretary), Mr Philip Brereton (Computer Officer, Department of Pathology), Mr Ian Clark (Computer Officer, Department of Genetics), Mr Richard Fieldsend (Computer Officer, Department of Psychology), Mr Gregory Habrych (Computer Officer, Department of Plant Sciences), Dr Marko Hyvonen (Chair of IT Committee, Department of Biochemistry), Mr Andy Judd (UIS, for Department of Veterinary Medicine), Mr Paul Judge (School Bioinformatics Training Facility, deputizing for Dr Rustici), Ms Elizabeth MacRae (Secretary of IT Committee, Department of Zoology), Dr Irina Mohorianu (Head of Scientific Computing, Stem Cell Institute), Dr Hugo Tavares (Research Associate, Sainsbury Laboratory)

New members of the Committee were welcomed.

1 Apologies: Mr Alastair Downie (IT Manager, Gurdon Institute), Dr Anton Enright (Chair of IT Committee, Department of Pathology), Professor Christopher Gilligan (Chair of IT Committee, Department of Plant Sciences), Professor Henrik Jonsson (Chair of IT Committee, Sainsbury Laboratory), Dr Gos Micklem (Director, Cambridge Computational Biology Institute), Mr Wentao Song (Computer Officer, Department of Physiology, Development and Neuroscience)

2 The Minutes of the meeting of 13th March 2019 were approved.

3 Matters arising from the Minutes

Research Computing: a preliminary report on the review of central Research Computing Services would be presented to the University’s Information Services Committee (ISC) on 13th June. A full report was expected in the autumn.

Institution File Store (IFS): Further work was being undertaken to clarify data security levels, without which the service could not be used for all required purposes.

ACTION UIS

4 Alastair Downie’s paper on research data management

The Committee broadly welcomed the proposal and agreed to approve a revised, perhaps shortened draft via email circulation, with a view to submitting that draft to the CSBS for its 8th July meeting. It would be important to gather views from Heads of Departments (HoDs) and to engage with our University Partner Institutes (UPIs) such as Babraham, EBI and Sanger. In discussions the following suggestions were made for redrafting at this stage, or for later consideration, as appropriate:

Include reference to other data repositories of various types eg at Diamond, EBI; emphasize the importance of training in data management/metadata/making data searchable; include reference to local resources; consider different data types, including needs for security; problems of managing data locally/directly from instruments. Members could also email Mr Downie directly with comments.

ACTION Mr Downie, Secretary, All
5 Revision of research computing allocation scheme

The Committee was asked to approve a change in the scheme so that PIs could by default apply for resources to the value of £5000. This would avoid multiple small applications by the same PIs, which caused a large administrative overhead, while reflecting the existing take-up by less than 10% SBS PIs. The original overall plan of ‘linear depreciation of the investment’ over five years would be unchanged. The Committee agreed to this change, subject to receiving ongoing reports. In addition, the Chair agreed that Research Computing Services staff could seek his approval if required during the absence of the Secretary. (This would be outside the ticket system used by default; the main requirement being to ensure applicants were from the School. This was usually straightforward, but care was needed in cross-schools institutions, such as the Stem Cell Institute, as other schools might have alternative arrangements).

The Committee also agreed to advertise the resources regularly within their departments, and the forthcoming course on ‘Research Computing: Infrastructure as a Service’.

ACTION All, Secretary

6 UBS IT support

A meeting had been held with UIS, followed by further oral report.

a) It had been agreed that Barcroft was not yet a good model for future support by UIS as further work was required. There was now a moratorium on the transfer of UBS email and storage to new platforms, as a result of the University email review and required work on IFS data levels (see Minute 3) respectively. It was agreed that UBS staff, being geographically dispersed, were a good case for early deployment of the planned UIS thin client/virtual desktop infrastructure but we were advised this was unlikely to occur before 2020.

b) In addition, the recent letters from the Chief Information Security Officer (CISO) to HoDs (see Minute 7B) had usefully highlighted the current [mis]attribution of responsibility. The Committee agreed that this could be tackled despite the delays in other service changes. It was thought that in all cases separate subnets, associated with UBS, could be set up, which would clarify the situation. It was also important that (SBS) staff in facilities, and UIS, were aware of who was the correct Authorized Officer and that there was complete clarity about this.

ACTION UIS, UBS, Departmental IT Staff, Secretary

7 Cyber Security

While hitherto there had been a tendency to address security issues purely at a departmental level, it was now appropriate to take an interest at School level, in support of both University aims and individual IT staff. There were currently several inter-linked issues:

A) Firewalls: It was noted that many departments had yet to upgrade their 1Gb network connections to 10Gb despite receiving £13 000 each from the School towards this in 2016. This, taken together with the ongoing absence of firewalls in some departments, pointed towards potential cooperation on technical matters, especially between some smaller departments, albeit the School had not mandated a formal School IT team. The Committee agreed this should be pursued with individual departments. An incentive
might be the need for basic Cyber Essentials certification, required by some funding agencies, for which a firewall was the top item listed.

B) Probing suite: After a hiatus the new UIS ‘friendly probing suite’ was operational and so UIS were again providing IT staff with regular information on connected devices in their departments. It was important that departments took full responsibility for devices connected to their network. If necessary, changes should be made by appropriate means eg updating, disconnection or change of responsibility (see Minute 6B; similarly, in some departments, action has recently been taken to move responsibility for a server completely to an external company). IT staff could seek confidential support from UIS and/or the School IT manager (Secretary).

C) CISO’s letters to HoDs: Some departments had recently received formal letters to their HoD about security issues. While follow-up at a University level (following the ISC meeting on 13th June) was awaited, this had already been discussed at the ISC Operations Committee (Minutes available to the Committee). If IT staff had been made aware by UIS that their HoD had received a letter but knew this had yet to be acted upon they were encouraged to seek support in dealing with it as under B).

ACTION IT staff, Secretary

8 Review Terms of Reference

The Committee agreed to remove reference to dates of meetings. Further review might be helpful later.

See https://www.bio.cam.ac.uk/csbs/sub-committees/it/tor

9 Any Other Business: there was none.

10 Dates of future meetings (arranged since the meeting)


(Date of next ISC Operations Committee meeting is 25th July 2019)