

Departmental Computing Open Forum

2006 Year Report

This is an informal summary of the major operations of the computing support staff over the past year. Details of recurring support tasks (maintenance, problem-solving) are not given.

This was presented to the department at the February 2007 Computing Forum meeting.

Overall Status

This year we have had major support personnel changes and have implemented new systems to cope with the changes.

Personnel Changes

Rosie Bailey was employed from June as Computer Support Technician. Christian left computer support to become the new PSC Software/Web Developer in October. Delays in appointing his replacement meant we were left short-staffed for the rest of the year – David Sole joined as Systems Administrator in January 2007. Cyrus is still working afternoons (and mornings with Careers). Barry Rowlingson continues to manage the service and do some systems work.

Support Service

With the increasing number of support personnel it became clear that keeping track of ongoing tasks with a whiteboard was inefficient and prone to problems. A machine was installed with the RT ticketing system, and a helpdesk email address was published. Mail to this address goes into the system and is then dealt with by the technical support team. The system has handled over 900 issues in nine months. A weekly meeting of the support staff is held to discuss current tasks and to prioritise activity for the week.

User PC Installations

This year we installed about 25 laptops and desktops including new staff, upgrades, and essential rebuilds. Windows computers are installed using the ISS managed build system, which still springs up the odd surprise which is worked on with ISS. Linux machines run Ubuntu Linux which remains our distribution of choice for its easy installation and upgrade path. The new PhD students took 7 laptops, and some completed PhD students returned theirs. The PhD students were offered the chance to buy their laptops.

The number of new installs is comparable to last year.

Web Service

The new web server machine was made live and the server software updated to the latest version of Zope and Plone. Some changes to content and structure were also made. Currently the new server acts as a back end to the old machine, serving Plone pages only. This takes load off the old machine which serves static content such as personal home pages. In the future we may shift everything to the new machine.

The CAS web server is now essentially deprecated and remains only to serve certain business processes that will be offloaded to new systems when possible.

Public Labs

There have been only minor changes in the computing labs: A1 Engineering continues to support remote windows desktops and central unix logins, and the JNL Linux servers were upgraded to Ubuntu. Some machines in the Resources Room were upgraded and a couple of broken machines replaced.

New Printers

Approximately 10 new printers were deployed to people around the department and over in the engineering annexe as well. Several old and broken printers were disposed of. This number is comparable to last year.

Penguins

The front-end machine, icefloe, was upgraded to the latest Ubuntu Linux, but the penguins themselves remain on an ancient RedHat Linux. Although this continues to work well, support issues may force an upgrade soon.

New Servers

The server for the RT helpdesk system and an HP ProCurve server for Ernst Wit were installed in the machine room. One of the Dell rack units was configured to act as a general Windows 2003 remote desktop service for staff. The machine room now contains:

- Penguin cluster (11 'desktop' machines, one rack unit)
- JNL Linux and Windows service (9 rack units)
- A1 Lab Windows service (5 rack units)
- Dept Windows remote desktop server (1 rack unit)
- Web servers (2 desktop units, one rack unit)
- Misc servers (print, backup, admin, RT)

Future Plans

In 2007 the support team will become increasingly involved in the fitting of the two labs in the new Postgraduate Statistics Centre, in association with the PSC staff. Discussions as to the fate of the Resources Room and JNL are under way, and we may see some change in their usage. The penguin cluster is still in need of an overhaul. We don't think ISS will be mandating Windows Vista for some years, and possible software and hardware compatibility problems mean we are better off sticking with XP anyway. Ubuntu Linux will continue with its six-monthly upgrade cycle with regular updates.

Barry

Joe