

Procurement issues – for discussion at strategy meeting 31/1/18.

As an institute IPAB possibly has the most largest and diverse range of equipment purchases, from needing some coloured paper to set up a demo, to shipping robots worth >£100K. Our concern is that several aspects of procurement procedures are not operating in a way that allows us to do our research effectively. We expect that other institutes may have encountered similar problems.

1) We are asked to order items from preferred suppliers, but are not told who those suppliers are, or given direct access to look at catalogues so that we can quickly identify the needed item. Requests to procurement to give us this information have been ignored.

2) For items requiring multiple quotes, but not specialist knowledge (e.g. furniture for robot set ups) procurement offers no support in obtaining the quotes, so researcher time is spent chasing this up.

3) Where specialist items come from a supplier not yet in the system, procurement requires specific paperwork from the company to enter them into the system, but again asks individual researchers to do the work of chasing the company for this information (bank statements, letterhead, etc., provision of invoice). In some cases the nature of the equipment makes such a process difficult to apply, e.g., experimental systems such as Oculus rift which could only be pre-ordered with a personal credit card; at present researchers can only do this at their own risk, with the possibility that a refund will not be allowed.

4) Problems in shipment that should be handled by procurement (e.g. need for papers for customs) are also reflected back to researchers to deal with, or indeed mishandled. E.g. Procurement was consulted over providing the right paperwork to allow a robot to be returned for repair to manufacturer and then shipped back to Edinburgh. In practice, the right paperwork was not there, and we were charged over £2.5k in import duty to get it released from customs.

5) For small items, we can no longer buy them and claim them back. Level offices have been very responsive in processing this kind of request, but it wastes everyone's time, particularly if the supplier is not in the system already (see above). In many cases, the inconvenience means researchers just pay for it themselves. E.g. a PhD student buying containers and spoons for testing robot manipulation of fluids, as they were needed to run tests in advance of a conference paper deadline. There either needs to be some flexibility in interpreting University policy on this, or push-back on the policy.

6) In general, the introduction of unnecessary delays in ordering fairly standard items. An extreme example: a ticket raised for laptop purchase on 27/11/2017 that still has not been ordered on 25/1/2018. This was partly explained by staff illness, but that just points to a problem in the system if a single member of staff is crucial to the process.

All this suggests that procurement processes and responsibilities in the School require some review and reorganisation to make them operate more effectively, and perhaps some dialogue needs to be opened with the university about reasonable cases for reimbursement of personal expenditure on equipment.

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