SCHOOL OF INFORMATICS

Strategy Committee

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Migration of email from Staffmail service to Office365 service

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Background

The vast majority of the University have migrated from the Staffmail email service to the University's Microsoft Office365 service. Informatics is the only organisational unit which has not yet committed to migrating to Office365.

Action requested from the committee

The committee is asked to endorse the decision of the School's executive group to migrate to Office 365.

Main subject text

The current Staffmail service is based on ageing infrastructure and has had very little investment in recent years, as more and more units within the University have been migrated to Office365. Within the past year, Informatics Services (IS) have downgraded the importance of the Staffmail service such that it would no longer be one of the first services to be re-instated following a disaster. IS are, understandably, keen to close the Staffmail service so that they do not have to support two email services.

Informatics is now the only organisational unit which has not yet committed to migrating to Office365. It is the author's view that it is not realistic to expect IS to continue to support Staffmail just for Informatics and that we should either migrate to Office365 or revert to running our own email service as we did before we adopted Staffmail.

Running our own email service is certainly a feasible option. Our estimate is that supporting a similar service to that which Informatics ran before adopting Staffmail would cost around 0.3 FTE. Introducing a robust solution in time for the next academic year would be challenging. Assuming that we would be unlikely to migrate off Staffmail during the academic year, there is a significant risk that we would have to remain on Staffmail until next summer. It is worth noting that running our own email service would be against our School's policy of adding value to IS services, and not replicating them. It is arguably not the most effective use of the School's computing staff.

Migrating to Office365 has its own issues. Many Apple and Windows mail clients (eg Apple Mail and Outlook) have good support for Exchange, the native protocol of Office365. However, there are no decent Linux mail clients with support for Exchange. Office365 supports the same protocol as

Staffmail, IMAP, so Linux users will be able to continue using the same email clients (eg Thunderbird, alpine) as they use for Staffmail. However, Office365's interpretation of IMAP is subtly different from Staffmail so there are some minor behaviour differences (eg with Thunderbird, mail un-delete can be somewhat slow). Depending on email client and the individual's email workflow, it is possible that a performance degradation compared to Staffmail may be experienced – on the other hand it is possible that performance may improve. Office365 mail filtering (server side) is not as powerful as on Staffmail, but this is likely to only affect a small number of "power users" and can be worked around. Users of all platforms can also make use of Office365's web front-end.

Both options require a migration process, so there will be some disruption. Many of the cited complaints from other Schools have been related to issues with the migration process. However, IS claim that they have, in the light of experience of many migrations over several years, significantly improved the migration process.

Executive group recently agreed that the School should migrate to Office365. When Office365 was mooted a few years ago, some people had serious concerns over hosting our email in "the cloud". Gavin McLachlan has offered to attend an open meeting of the School to allay these concerns. This meeting is being scheduled for some time in June – by which time both Jane Hillston and Stuart Anderson will have migrated to Office365 and can also present on their experiences. The expectation is that the School would migrate to Office365 by mid August. IS have agreed to provide additional on-site support for a period of time after people have migrated.

Equality and diversity implications – None identified

Resource implications (staff, space, budget)

Migrating off Staffmail will involve some work for all Informatics staff and research postgraduates. For most this should be limited to re-configuring their mail client to speak to the replacement mail service. For those people with server side filters, it will involve porting those filter rules to the new service. For some users, some minor issues with their existing mail will be identified by IS prior to migration that will need correcting – eg characters in subject lines which are accepted by Staffmail but not accepted by Office365.