Student Representatives Report – 16th May 2006

Overview

This report has been prepared by Rupert Shuttleworth (the "I" below) on behalf of the CSE Student Representatives, for the period April 4th to May 16th, 2006.

Labs

Capacity

Lab capacity problems have been a major issue this session. Last session there was only 1 hour a week where less than 6 labs were available; that has increased dramatically to 17 hours a week this session.

Lecturers have commented that the number of 1st year students seems to have increased, and from looking at the class utilisation pages the increase seems quite large. When you combine a student population that does not appear to have decreased dramatically, if at all, with:

- The effective closure of the K14 labs for anyone not doing EN1811

- A timetable scheduling system that does not make an effort to keep a certain number of labs free (less than 6 is bad, but there are actually times this session when 0 labs are free)

… then you end up with a lot of frustrated students.

Recommendations:

- Reopen the K14 labs to all students. Either let students use the Windows labs (which on average seem to have 2 labs free at all times), or convert the labs back to Linux machines as soon as possible.

- Modify the timetabling system with an extra constraint that it must keep a minimum or 4 or 5 labs free at all times. Ideally, these would be the same labs (perhaps EE-UC and J17-UC) so that students knew where to head to if they wanted to find a free terminal.

Booking terminals

Students have expressed frustration at logging in to a computer only to be told that it has been booked for someone else. In previous years the terminal appearance changed to reflect booked terminals (with red backgrounds, etc.) and it is unclear why this feature has been removed.

Students have also expressed a general dislike of using the booking system because of the inability to make instant bookings. Instead, students are limited to booking only the next 30min ahead or hour ahead (if they are lucky). If a student has an hour to spare, it is unlikely they will want to waste half of that waiting to claim their booked terminal.

Both the Help Desk and System Support have suggested that promoting the booking system more might somehow fix the capacity problem. In my opinion this is unlikely to solve anything but I appreciate any efforts being made on our behalf.

Recommendations:

- Change the terminal appearance so that it is clear if a terminal has been booked or not. (Perhaps, bring back red backgrounds like we had in 2005).

- Change the booking system to allow instant bookings. ("Reserve me a computer somewhere, tell me where it is")

Temperatures

Throughout this session students have made various complaints about the disparate temperatures in the labs. Students have complained that some labs were way too hot, while other labs were way too cold. We have been told that air conditioners in some labs were broken, or misbehaving, or that some labs were simply impossible to air condition effectively (such as the laptop lab). Lecturers have made similar complaints about the general state of air conditioning in K17.

Attempts to understand the way the current system works have been somewhat unsuccessful. One member of the Help Desk staff told us to "dig up relevant info from the library" but with an added a caveat that "theory is always different from the real world". From my point of view this is less than helpful.

Recommendations:

- Put temperature statistics up on the CSE website, ideally updated hourly so that students can make their way to labs that have temperatures they prefer.

Etiquette

Many people have complained about other students being generally obnoxious in labs. Whether this is because they are playing games or talking on mobile phones or just chatting really loudly with their friends, there doesn't seem to be anything students can do about this besides try and find another lab.

To quote one student,

> "It's very hard to work with people screaming at each other across the labs. I don't care if they've been in the lab the whole day and I just came in, I shouldn't have to change labs or put up with this kind of thing."

I remember in first year there were very harsh penalties for having food in labs, but I don't remember anyone being punished for being a general jackass.

Recommendations:

- Make it clear to students (especially first years) that labs are supposed to be quiet areas

Laptop Lab

While most students appear to be very grateful for the upgrade the laptop lab has received (even if it was at an exorbitant cost), some are also frustrated that they are not allowed to eat or drink there.

Given that we have so little space around K17 to sit, especially with desks and power points, it is unfortunate that one of the spaces we do have is intended only as a space where students can "finish their work for about an hour or two" and not as a long term area.

The Help Desk has suggested that CSE might be able to provide an expanded or alternative area for students to work in the future; in my view it might be best for the laptop lab to formally annex the basement rooms (B-01, B-02, etc) and have that whole area combined into a space where students can work (and eat, if possible).

Recommendations

- Review the eating/drinking policy, and consider adding more bins or cloths or other ways for students to self-manage the area. A kettle or microwave or otherwise for students to use would also be very appreciated.

- Review the possibility of expanding the laptop lounge in the basement rooms (which surely could be air conditioned more effectively than the staircase area)

Courses

COMP2920 Professional Issues and Ethics

Early in the session we received complaints about the teaching methods (or lack thereof) of a certain COMP2920 tutor; this seems resolved for now, either that or the students in question have given up.

COMP3141 Software System Design and Implementation

A request was made for a course forum for COMP3141 about a month ago and as far as I know nothing has yet materialised. Students also expressed some frustration with their first assignment (mainly a lack of time); an extension of a few days was given to the relief of many.

COMP3311 Database Systems

Students expressed frustration with the first COMP3311 project, finding the spec very confusing. The lecturer continually made updates to it, yet it "still remained contradictory".

An extension was given at the last minute; the new due date is today so we are still awaiting feedback on how helpful the extension was.

COMP3331 Computer Networks and Applications

The average mark for the COMP3331 mid-session was 16/35 (i.e., a FL) and many students were obviously distressed about this. The lecturer's way of consoling them was to append the lecture slides for the next week by giving an example of someone who had scored 16/35 in the mid-session but who still managed to achieve a final mark of 59/100 after trying hard for the rest of session. To me, this would not be very comforting.

The course seems to be structured so that students are expected to get very high/perfect marks in the assignments and prac exams, and very low and distressing marks in the theory exams. The problem with this is that if someone managed to screw up an "easy" assignment, it would be very hard for them to make up those marks in the exams. This also gives an unfair advantage to anyone who is able to procure a past exam paper, as the questions do not significantly change from session to session.

COMP3411 Artificial Intelligence

Many students expressed frustration with the first assignment; the main complaint by far seemed to be "I don't even know where to start". There were various concerns about the test data and how marking would be carried out.

In the end some students lost 25% of their mark purely because they had the wrong formatting in their output, while other students ended up giving in and dropping the course, even after the lecturer gave an extension.

The second assignment was easier but still plagued by an ambiguous spec with very minimal test data for students to go on.

COMP4001 Object-Orientated Software Development

By far the majority of our course-based complaints have been about COMP4001. Since a month ago from today we have been receiving a stream of complaints from frustrated students, the key concerns were:

- The lecturer often corrects the slides during lectures but doesn't upload the corrected slides on to the course page

- The first assignment was supposed to be released in Week 4 but was delayed until Week 6. However the spec was incomplete and it was not until Week 7 that a useful spec was released. The lecturer mentioned that the deadline would be extended, but no date was given.

- Eventually a date of April 24th was settled on, however on April 23rd, there was still no way for students to submit their assignment nor any

mention of another extended due date. On April 24th the due date was extended again until April 26th, and give was finally set up to accept submissions.

- During this time there were no consults, tutorials or labs. Consults were meant to take place "online", however the lecturer would not reply to e-mails. There was also no course forum, so some students resorted to creating a thread for COMP4001 in a general chat forum. It was only yesterday that a forum was finally set up, a month after students originally complained.

Students have expressed frustration that they received no feedback on how they were going in the course, and that no information or apology was ever issued for the continually extended deadlines. The only information they had was that "specs/test code/submission instructions were still to come".

ENGG1811 Computing for Engineers

One of the ENGG1811 tutors hadn't marked the first assignment, even though other classes had already received marks 1-2 weeks earlier. As far as I know this has been resolved now.

CSE

Help Desk

While Help Desk staff are often very helpful, students are concerned about the extremely restrictive opening hours. The new opening hours for this year are:

- 1PM-3PM Mon-Fri
- 5PM-6PM Mon-Thu

These hours are clearly unacceptable. Often students are "waiting outside the doors of the helpdesk when it is due to open".

I've been told that the downsizing resulted in over half the support staff losing their jobs, while academics escaped unscathed. If the end result of this is a Help Desk that is effectively out of action for the majority of the day, perhaps this decision should be reviewed.

Recommendations:

- The Help Desk should be open at least between 11AM and 5PM every weekday.

Quotas

During the election campaign earlier in the year, many students expressed dissatisfaction with their IP Quotas and to a lesser extent their Disk Quotas. Also, during the First Year Focus Group earlier this session, international students said that campus wide Internet access is free of charge in North America due to major telecom companies changing deals and plans for universities.

This concern with IP quotas does not seem limited to students; lecturers have also expressed disapproval with the limited IP quotas they are given (which are much larger than student quotas), and stated that CSE is getting somewhat shafted by UNSW in regards to internet access, and would perhaps be more wise to simply buy access from a ISP like Optus in the future.

In regards to disk quotas, some students like to keep their assignments from previous subjects archived on CSE in case they ever need to refer to them later on. The longer a student is at CSE, the harder this becomes, as students are not given allocations per year but are instead given a base allocation of 50MB.

Recommendations:

- Double the IP quotas for all students. And if CSE really is getting a bad deal from UNSW, perhaps investigate alternative Internet access schemes for the future.

- Provide a small 5MB disk quota addition for every (COMP|ENGG|SENG|BINF) subject a student has done. For example, if a student has completed 4 COMP subjects, add 20MB to their disk quota.

Night School

Some students (including myself) are extremely frustrated with the amount of lectures that take place during 6-10PM. If a student is unable to attend these lectures, they must rely on lecture notes - which are often incomplete or not available at all. And it seems silly to pay $700 for a course just to learn it from lecture notes.

Whilst I appreciate that classes are scheduled at night mainly so that postgraduate students can attend, this seems somewhat of a myth; during a 6-9PM lecture last year in which about 150 people were in attendance, the lecturer asked the group how many of them actually had jobs during the day and needed to attend night school. Only 2 or 3 people put up their hands.

Personally, I am probably not going to take any more night classes at CSE after a bad experience last year, so I am left facing the prospect of missing out on courses that sound interesting to me but are scheduled for only night lectures.

Recommendations:

- Please review how many courses really need to be scheduled at night.

Accountability

I've been told that there is no (or very little) monitoring of academics doing no work; that in the big downsize no academics "were fired or held up to a minimum standard of effort, much less outcome" - at the expensive of 1/2 to 2/3 of the support staff.

Given the amount of complaints received about courses in just the last 5 or 6 weeks, this seems pretty unfair – and damaging to students, not just because we rely on the Help Desk.

I would suggest that, if nothing else, results from the multiple choice sections of the surveys students fill in at the end of sessions be made public. This would not only help students select subjects (and not be faced with having to drop a subject halfway through session), but might also encourage some lecturers to be more lecturer-like in the future.

I've been told that some Universities already do this (the example I was given was a Western Australian one), and I think the benefits here would far outweigh any potential concerns.

Recommendations:

- Put statistics from the multiple-choice sections of end of session surveys up on the CSE website on a per-course basis.

Student Representatives

It wouldn't be fair for us to throw criticisms around without also taking a good look at ourselves. The stureps are far from perfect; half of our members have been pretty much M.I.A. for the past 6 weeks.

However, we are trying to improve all the time and suggestions are always welcome.

Recommendations:

- Please, to stureps@cse.unsw.edu.au