

CSE Stureps 2009
Head of School Summary Report
29th September, 2009

2009 Stureps

| | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| First Year | Jonathan Yeong, Michael Truong |
| Second Year | Alan Zeino |
| Third Year | David Claridge, Sim Mautner |
| Fourth Year & Above | Adam Brimo, Daniel Ho |
| Contact | stureps@cse.unsw.edu.au |

Contents

| | | |
|----------|--|----------|
| 1 | Overview | 2 |
| 2 | Courses | 2 |
| 2.1 | First Year Computing | 2 |
| 2.1.1 | COMP1917 - Higher Computer 1 | 2 |
| 2.1.2 | COMP1927 - Higher Data Structures and Algorithms | 2 |
| 2.2 | COMP2121 - Microprocessors and Interfacing | 3 |
| 2.3 | COMP2911 - Computing Design | 3 |
| 2.4 | COMP4601 - Design Project B | 4 |
| 2.5 | COMP9021 - Principles of Programming | 4 |
| 2.6 | COMP9322 - ServiceOriented Architectures | 5 |
| 2.7 | COMP9444/9844 - Neural Networks | 5 |
| 3 | Clashes | 6 |
| 4 | Advanced Courses | 6 |
| 5 | Quotas | 7 |
| 5.1 | Disk Quota | 7 |
| 5.2 | Internet Quota | 7 |
| 5.3 | Print Quota | 8 |
| 6 | CSE | 9 |
| 6.1 | Stureps | 9 |

1 Overview

This report has been prepared by the CSE Stureps and covers the period beginning the March 2009 and ending September, 2009. It's contents draws upon formal and informal feedback from students undertaking CSE courses and the survey run during the first month of session two 2009.

The Stureps ran a survey from the first weeks of session two 2009 until the mid September, 2009. During this period of time approximately 87 unique students responded by answering some or all of the questions. This report focuses on their extended responses to the open ended questions in the survey as well as the multiple choice questions.

2 Courses

2.1 First Year Computing

2.1.1 COMP1917 - Higher Computer 1

The comments were generally fairly positive, particularly noting that the lectures were helpful and that the course was well organised.

“This course was alright. It was pretty well organised and ran fairly smoothly. The course content was ok too. Morri was a pretty good lecturer: lectures were not boring, he provided good notes, he was understandable and the assignments he gave were manageable.”

“The lecturer, Alan Blair, is able to explain the materials clearly, even though we initially dont understand anything.”

Some feedback received from a student currently undertaking COMP1917 suggested that some students may struggle slightly without prior computing knowledge. In particular the student has issues in setting up his computer with the appropriate tools to work from home. This may suggest that some mid year entry students did not attend lab0 or did not know about the help available.

2.1.2 COMP1927 - Higher Data Structures and Algorithms

The comments for this course were mixed however the majority of respondents felt that the course demanded too much time and that the workload was excessive. Some of the students found Richard Buckland's lectures interesting and enjoyable yet even more students thought that his lecturers did not adequately cover all of the material he expected the students to know.

“Labs are too long. Takes more than 10-12 hours per week.”

“Richard Buckland: best lecturer. Ever. Downside: Workload a bit too heavy I find it difficult to even think about any of my 3 other subjects. Task 2 is due during midsession break - I dont like that. ”

One student noted that they received an HD in 1917 however are struggling to keep up with the workload and teaching style that Richard uses. Multiple students noted that the course was disorganized, that the labs are being released late and that those with labs on a Friday would be disadvantaged as labs are due to be submitted electronically the following Monday.

The sentiment that the course is disorganised is most likely related to the lack of structured lecture slides or notes for the course. Part of Richard's teaching style is that each lab class is responsible for creating lecture notes on the wiki; the quality of the notes can vary and they are not completed immediately. Therefore when students don't have any notes to print out prior to the lecture and may have to wait a week before being able to review the notes.

The tutors were noted to be helpful whenever possible however they cannot answer course administration questions or ensure that labs and assignments are released on time. The sentiment of a number of the students was similar to the following comment.

"I am actually very interested in computing courses and I understand how important it is to practise programming. But this course is absolutely killing for me and I really don't want to have a harsh and exhausting course like this again. "

The differences in Richard's teaching style and the significant workload of the course are magnified by the contrast between COMP1917 and COMP1927. Whereas the former was taught with a similar structure to most university courses, the latter is taught by Richard with a different teaching style, less organisation and a higher workload.

2.2 COMP2121 - Microprocessors and Interfacing

This course has received positive feedback on the previous Stureps surveys however this year the results were more negative for the session one offering although positive for the session two offering. In general the respondents found the content of the course slightly dry and felt that the tutors could provide more help with the labs.

"This course hasn't changed in aeons and it shows. The course seems dry and mechanical, labs simply require the student to be a human compiler."

"It is great. Quite useful and interesting and I really get a lot. I like it."

2.3 COMP2911 - Computing Design

Many of the respondents felt that the course was poorly organised and that they did not receive adequate feedback throughout the session.

"Was a good course at learning OO programming but John Potter was very disorganized and I seemed to find that a lot of what was taught in labs and in assignments wasn't relevant to the theory taught."

This course is an ongoing concern and it is possible that these issues are related to the course being changed every session rather than standardised. If the same assignments and lecture notes were reused every session then after two sessions the dry-run would be bug free and the lecture notes would be concise and hopefully more relevant. This would also reduce the workload on John Potter and ensure that the labs are released in plenty of time.

This session the course is being taught by Wayne Wobcke with far fewer students. Only a couple comments were received for this session's offering with one student satisfied with the course and the other feeling that the lab and assignment specifications were too vague.

2.4 COMP4601 - Design Project B

Only a few comments were received for this course however a very detailed response by one student highlighted some potential issues. The work for this course is done in teams and the teams were automatically chosen based upon a student's WAM. Hence students with the highest WAM were in the same group and those with the lowest WAM would be in other groups. This is potentially unfair to students as the WAM may not be the best indicator of a student's abilities.

“The groups were automatically decided and based on WAM (so the best people were all in the same group, the worst people in the same group). [...] At the end of the course two groups had not been able to complete even one stage (out of 3) in the project. Instead of failing or PC they were given an extension to be able to hand it in up to 4 weeks into 2nd semester.”

It appears that if the students were able to choose their own groups or their own projects (as suggested by another respondent) then it may have improved the situation.

2.5 COMP9021 - Principles of Programming

All three responses for this course mentioned that the assignment was very difficult and challenging while one respondent went into further detail on the entire course. The student, undertaking a Graduate Certificate, responded with the following:

“Mr Martin gave out demanded far too much of students in their first semester of programming with no background. [...] Mr Martin also delivered an assignment in which he gave incorrect specs for a task, which was worth 40% of the assignment, and upon whose correct working the next 20% task relied. He corrected the specs when I pointed this out to him, but only did so less than a week before the assignment was due. When I pointed out that we should be given an extension because of this, he said that he did not believe the change in specs amounted to a major difference. The difference in specs actually was a change from reproducing a ‘bare puzzle, read from some files he supplied’ and outputting a ‘solved puzzle using a method described in an article attached’ which naturally involves a great deal more coding.”

These issue will require further discussion with Eric Martin and it might be worth looking into the background experience required for some of the graduate certificates.

2.6 COMP9322 - ServiceOriented Architectures

A few issues with this course were raised in students' responses, in particular, that the labs do not cover the course material and that the lecturer does not adequately explain the topics in lectures and suggests that all questions are directed to the tutors.

“What you learn in lectures are not directly applicable (if at all) to the assignments. [...] the technology we were using were all out of date (Java 1.4, ActiveVOS v. 4). We were told to use ActiveVOS yet a license wasnt even attained for it until 2 weeks after assignment was released.” (Session one)

“Assignment workload is fine and material is interesting and lecture notes of high standard, but it could be run better...”

In general the comments revolved around the lecturers not being particularly useful and that the labs do not prepare students for the assignments.

2.7 COMP9444/9844 - Neural Networks

Some undergraduate Computer Science students taking the course found that the mathematics knowledge required to understand the material in some topics (particularly for assignment 2, Support Vector Machines), was well beyond the formal prerequisite knowledge for the course (MATH1A, 1B and Discrete Maths, seeing as any CS major can take the course).

“The lecturer (Achim) assumed students understood the theory behind Lagrange multipliers, Kernel functions, and other topics from 2nd year calculus, and breezed right past them in lectures. [...] the result of this was that most students did assignment 2 by simply substituting numbers into formulas without actually understanding anything about what's going on, and we are quite worried that questions will come up in the final exam (worth 70%) that require a proper understanding of how these things work.”

This issue mostly seems to be affecting the undergraduates in the course, possibly because CSE has fewer requirements for the level of mathematics covered in a Computer Science major than other institutions. Most of the postgrad students appear to be handling the content just fine.

3 Clashes

Due to the new universal timetabling system used by UNSW, a number of courses which may be popular with students clash with one another. This year, the survey asked whether or not the respondent was not able to take a course due to it clashing with another course. The following table shows the clashes which existed in session one and two 2009 that have been noted by students.

| Course | Clashes with: |
|----------|--|
| COMP2041 | BIOM9420, COMP3331, COMP3421, COMP3331, COMP2121 |
| COMP2121 | COMP2041 |
| COMP3161 | COMP3171, COMP3431 |
| COMP3171 | ELEC3117 |
| COMP3421 | COMP2121, COMP9315 |
| COMP3511 | COMP4431 |
| COMP9031 | GESO9820 |
| COMP9041 | COMP9336 |
| COMP9161 | COMP9151 |
| COMP9315 | COMP3421 |
| SENG1031 | MATH1241 |

4 Advanced Courses

In recent years the number of advanced courses being offered by CSE has decreased due to declining enrollments and lessened interest. The survey this session asked students which advanced courses they planned on taking out of the current offering.

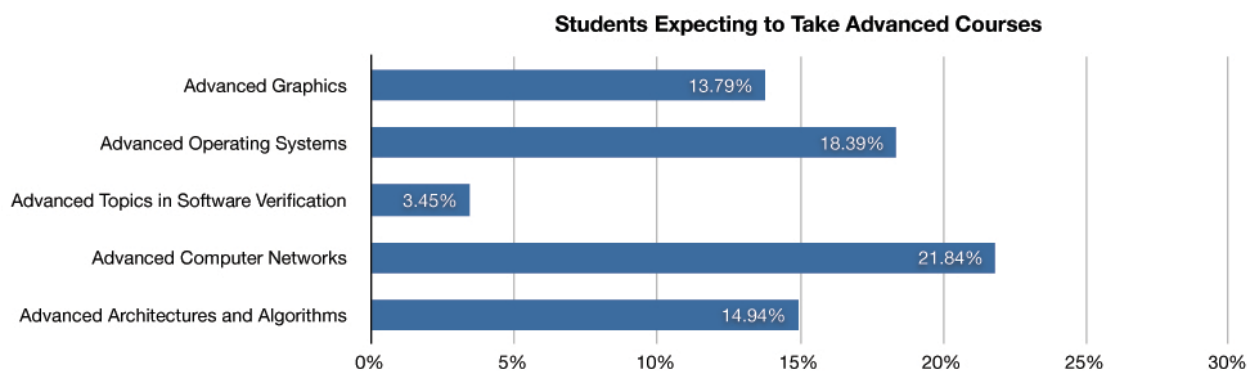


Figure 1:

5 Quotas

5.1 Disk Quota

Overview

It is currently not possible for students to acquire more disk quota from CSE, even if a student would like to purchase it. Undergraduate students only receive a base allocation of 50mbs which can easily be exceeded by students requiring to run large tests on code or the increasing sizes of email. This allocation has not been changed recently while the sizes of files students must work with has increased.

Recommendations / Resolutions

Students would greatly benefit from increased disk quota. Many students regularly exceed or come close to exceeding their disk quota due to normal usage and the requirements of their courses.

5.2 Internet Quota

Overview

UNIWIDE access for students with their own laptops is now free. Only a few years ago students were required to pay \$1 connection fees and were charged by the megabyte. Hence the university has gradually reduced the cost of internet usage on campus for both schools and students alike. CSE is behind the rest of the university in this regard; many CSE students do not have laptops or do not bring them to university. This means that some students will quickly run out of IP quota whilst others are enjoying the free internet provided by UNSW.

According to the CSE website, students are supplied with the following IP quota:

1. A base allocation per session of 200Mb if the student is enrolled in at least one COMP or SENG

Is the Disk Quota Sufficient?

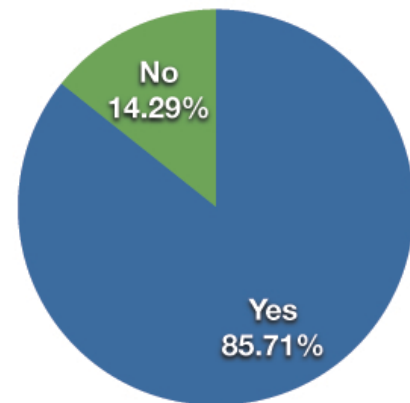


Figure 2:

Is the IP Quota Sufficient?

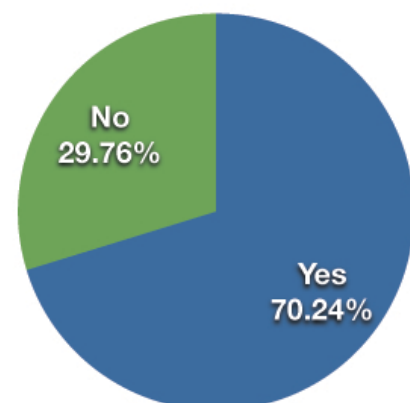


Figure 3:

course.

2. An additional 50 Mb per session for every COMP or SENG course enrolled.
3. Thesis students receive an additional 200Mb.

Students are allowed to purchase additional IP quota from CSE at the following rate, "The cost is \$1 per 40Mb of IP Quota." The stureps do not believe this is reasonable as it currently exceeds the cost of bandwidth on mobile devices and CSE is no longer charged for bandwidth.

Recommendations / Resolutions

It would make sense for CSE to remove the bandwidth limits for CSE students. As far as the Stureps are aware, CSE is no longer charged for their bandwidth usage and therefore this savings should be passed onto the students. Additionally, for the sake of equality between those with laptops and those without, all students should have equal access to the internet.

If CSE is concerned that students will download excessive amounts of data then they could set an arbitrary limit of 100MB per day or 500MB per week if SS would like to keep using the quota system.

5.3 Print Quota

Overview

Many students no longer print out their lecture notes or any other material and prefer to read document on their computers'. However the students who do print out lecture notes on a weekly basis find the current print allocation insufficient. Print allocation of just over a hundred pages per course means that students cannot print out lecture notes on a weekly basis or all of their study notes at the end of the session.

Recommendations / Resolutions

CSE is one of the few schools that provides free print quota to students however if that print quota could be increased it would allow students to print out their code for review or lecture notes for studying.

Is the Print Quota Sufficient?

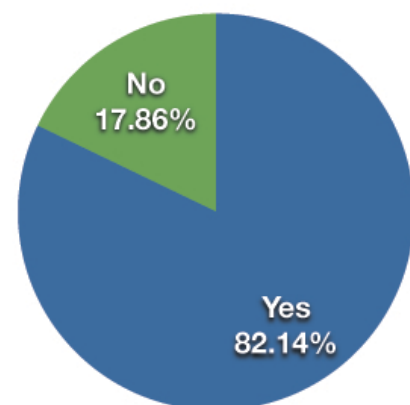


Figure 4:

6 CSE

6.1 Stureps

The Stureps are generally active when complaints or comments are received from students and when a survey is run to gather feedback. The amount of traffic coming through the stureps mail alias has decreased in recent years however the Stureps regularly handle issues that are brought to their attention by their peers.

In this last survey, students provided feedback on over 110 course offerings across two sessions. The majority of these comments were positive indicating that students are very satisfied for the most part with the facilities provided.

Please direct feedback to: stureps@cse.unw.edu.au