Laptops for incoming members

Background
Several DPhil students have made clear that they find the Dell laptops provided by the Department to be unsuited to their needs. Complaints sometimes relate to performance, including battery life, and speed of carrying out calculations or running algorithms. Some would prefer to have a tablet device than a full laptop; others prefer to have an Apple Macbook, perhaps because of familiarity with the operating system.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many laptops are being handed out and hardly or never being used by the student. This is clearly a huge waste of Department resources, and the status quo seems unsustainable.

Considerations
One option is to give students a budget with which to buy their own laptop; this however has significant downsides. First, it makes it hard to the IT Staff to verify that everyone's machine has up-to-date security measures, which is particularly crucial in the light of the recent hack of the History Faculty. It also makes it difficult for the IT Staff to help with maintenance and also means that in the event of a more substantive problem, the student cannot be immediately given a substitute laptop from a bank of spares kept by the Department.

An alternative, which is favoured by IT Staff, is that a list of laptops and tablets that can be purchased is produced (see the Annex), and given to supervisors in the months before the new students start their course. There would then be a deadline for the supervisor to select a laptop, in consultation with the student, and pass this information to the IT Team. Failure to do so would result in the student not having a computer available when they began their course, so this should provide a strong incentive to meet the deadline.

In certain cases there may be a choice of operating system (for example, Windows, Linux or a dual-boot device). Such a selection should be made as a consultation between the student and supervisor.

Since there will be a finite budget, we anticipate that supervisors may wish to top up the budget, either from a grant which allows this or from their PRA. There are questions of fairness about this last aspect, since some supervisors will not feel able to provide funds; however, the Committee do not want to place an artificial restriction on the possibilities for any student. The selected laptop should be an upgraded version of one already on the approved list, in order to ensure that the IT Staff are able to manage any support issues that may arise. We also note that some students may prefer to keep their existing laptop; in this case, provided that their current machine and its set-up satisfies our Information Security policy, they can choose to defer receiving a laptop from the Department until the following year.

Not all computation needs to be performed on an individual laptop, even if it does contain a GPU. Some jobs are much better suited to being performed on a high-performance computing (HPC) cluster. Training in the use of HPCs, including slurm for queuing jobs, is available from the IT staff. We note that individuals with a GPU laptop who have a shared office must be mindful about the noise level of their device if it is using the GPU.

All laptops and other equipment purchased by the University remain its property. As such all must be returned to IT if either (i) it is no longer required; or (ii) at the end of the individual's course or employment.

Recommendations
- Students will be able to choose a laptop or tablet from a pre-approved list.
- The selection must be made by an agreed deadline.
- If the student is happy with their existing arrangement—and it satisfies our Information Security Policy—then they may choose to defer the purchase for a year.
- If their supervisors wish, they can top-up the budget for a student's purchase to an upgraded model.

RJE
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