ISA News
Aiming for Excellence in ICT Services

Aston University

Contact the Editor

If you have any comments or suggestions on how we can improve ISA News for you, please contact:

Amy Roberton, Communications and Research Officer on 0121 204 4929 or email robertae@aston.ac.uk

It's back, fresh faced and with a new face!

Welcome to the new look ISA News. After a six month break, your bi-monthly newsletter has returned, bringing with it me, your new editor.

In each edition we hope to bring you all the latest news and updates about what we're doing here at Information Systems Aston including:

- Developments to the ICT systems you use in your daily work
- Current issues that help us ensure you get the continuing support you need
- Training and events to help you understand and use ICT more effectively
- The work of different departmental teams to help you understand what we do and who to contact if you need us!

In this edition read about how Voicehost Internet Telephony helped the University's fundraising efforts, the return of our ISA Open Day 2008, and what's new with the ICT systems and technologies you use. Discover what ISA staff do when their not at work and what I do when I am, and take a look at the latest Student Satisfaction results and what we're doing in response.

I hope you enjoy reading ISA News and find it useful and interesting. If you have any suggestions about how we can improve the newsletter for you, you can contact me using my details in the bottom left of this page.

Happy reading!

Amy Roberton, Editor
Communications and Research Officer

Amy Roberton - Telling IT to you straight
ISA introduce their new Communications and Research Officer

Before I introduce myself and take you through what my role here at ISA will involve, I just need to take off my Editor hat for a moment and put my broader Communications and Research Officer hat on!

I joined ISA nearly two months ago after relocating from York where I'd been working for the past 3 ½ years in the Marketing Communications team of a healthcare company. After deciding that the West Midlands was where my future lay, I was fortunate enough to stumble across this role which offered the perfect opportunity for me to combine my passion for communications with my keen interest in IT.

I'm also very fortunate in that my role as Communications

and Research Officer is extremely varied and the easiest way to explain it is to split it into three main areas.

Telling you what you need to know
First and foremost I am responsible for all communica-

tion that takes place between ISA and our customers who, in short, is you! To give you a full list of every communications activity that I could get involved with however, would be far too long for this brief introduction but to give you an

More achievement awards for ISA staff

Congratulations to ISA's Direct Services Manager, Dr Morteza Alamolhoda, who won the runner-up medal for Service Manager of the Year at last year's British Computer Society's IT Industry Awards.

The awards, considered to be the most important event in the IT calendar, mark the "key contribution made by the IT industry to economic prosperity, business efficiency and to our public services" (BCS). Morteza's award was in recognition of his revolutionary organisational model, Dynamic Organisation Plan (DOP), which was implemented by the Direct Services team in February 2006.

To receive his award, Morteza joined 2500 guests at an exclusive gala dinner held in London's Grosvenor House Hotel on the 6th December 2007. Hosted by BBC news presenter, Kate Silverton, and at-

Morteza collecting his award at the BCS IT Industry Awards, December 2007.

tended by some of the UK's leading IT specialists, the event also marked the 50th Anniversary of the British Computer Society, a milestone celebrated with the largest awards ceremony to date.

Reflecting on his achievement Morteza said: "Although this was an individual award, it would not have been possible without the hard work and dedication of my excellent team. It is in fact national recognition of the Direct Services Team's success."

Direct Services is responsible for the front line IT support of Aston University, answering the IT needs of both staff and students. Morteza added: "Direct Services is a team of outstanding standards, excellent professionalism and highly dedicated to their responsibilities."

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idea of what I'll be doing, some of my key activities will include writing our bi-monthly internal newsletter, overseeing the ISA pages on the University website, and organising events to help you find out more about ICT. Through these I hope to give you all the latest news on what is going on here in ISA and keep you up to date on the various ICT facilities you use everyday.

Telling me what you think
Listening to what you have to say is also another key part of my role. The aim of ISA is to provide you with 'Excellence in ICT services' but we can only do this with your help. If you have any complaints or compliments about the work of the department, the ICT facilities you use, or the communications you receive,

I want to know. Good or bad, all feedback is important and you can send me yours using my contact details at the front of this newsletter.

The quest for knowledge
As well as communications, I'll also be getting involved in a lot of research within the department. These will include:

- Market research to ensure that ISA is providing the level of customer care and service that you expect
- Focus groups to find out what you think of the communications you receive
- Non-technical research into various ICT products
- Research into external factors such as

green issues, that could affect the way the department operates

Show me the money!
Finally, I will also be taking a keen interest in any potential funding opportunities from both internal and external sources.

Despite being part of the team for only two months I already feel settled and ready to take on the challenges ahead of me. We have a lot coming up over the next few months including the return of our ISA Open Day and a new Staff ICT guide, and that's before I start on the development and improvement of ICT throughout the University.

So keep your eyes open and your opinions voiced; I'll tell you what's going on and you tell me what you think!

Accessing the spam filter

Did you know you can view and retrieve emails sent to you and caught in the University spam filter by visiting https://mailscanner.aston.ac.uk.

Every email that is sent to you goes through a spam filter which scans and removes any it identifies as potential spam. These are then held under quarantine.

If you think that a genuine email has

been caught in the filter you can log on to the mailscanner where you can view all recent emails that have been scanned. Internal emails from within the University will not be shown here.

Any emails that have been identified as potential span will be highlighted in red. If you think a highlighted email is genuine, you can release it by clicking on the "Quarantine" link in the top navigation bar. To find the email, choose the relevant folder for the day the email was sent and open it. To open your quarantined email click on the first column (#). This will allow you to read the email and view details about the sender.

To release the email, scroll to the bottom of the page, tick the 'Release' box in the bottom left corner and then click the 'Submit' button in the bottom right. You will receive an email in your inbox from postmaster@aston.ac.uk with your quarantined email attached.

Mailscanner also allows you to add addresses to a 'Safe Senders' and 'Blocked Senders' list. Simply click on 'Lists' in the navigation bar, enter the details and tick the relevant box. This should ensure future genuine emails get through the filter and spam emails are caught. For more information please email isa_helpdesk@aston.ac.uk.

Voicehost Internet Telephony
helps University's fundraising efforts

The Aston Annual Fund was established to harness the good-will of Aston's alumni and friends and is a key part of the University's fundraising strategy. It is supported by two telephone appeals per academic year, which usually take place in the autumn and spring terms. A team of current students telephone Aston graduates to ask them to pledge their support for the University, and help fund projects across the campus community.

Last year, with approximately 5000 calls to make, the team decided to use an Internet Telephony service called Voicehost. Using only a computer connected to the internet, the students were able to make calls to graduates all over the world.

To carry out the campaign, the Development & Alumni Relations Office and ISA set up a call room equipped with computing facilities in the Aston Multimedia Interactive Research Suite (AMIRS www.amirs.co.uk). To enable the students to make telephone calls, each computer was installed with a Softphone; a specialist piece of software that converts the caller's voice into information that can be sent over the internet. Voicehost allows users to choose a Softphone from a range of providers and, based on testing carried out by ISA, X-Lite 3.0 was chosen (see top right). This is a popular choice offering an easy to use telephone which can also cater for both voice and video communications.

The AMIRS IT training suite

Using X-Lite, the students were able to make calls in the same way as a standard telephone - the only difference being that their telephone was on their computer screen and in place of a handset they used a microphone and headset.

Throughout the campaign, both students and staff in the Development & Alumni Relations Office were impressed with Voicehost. Annual Fund Manager, Luke Taylor, said: "As it was a telephone campaign, it was crucial that the equipment we used was stable and able to work how we needed it. From start to finish Voicehost proved to be extremely reliable, helping us to successfully contact graduates across the world."

A key benefit of using Voicehost was the significant savings on call charges. Compared to standard telephones, calls to landlines are cheaper and calls to other PCs using Voicehost are free. This helped the University save approximately £2000 compared to last year's campaign.

In addition, Voicehost also offers enhanced security benefits compared to other Internet Telephony providers. ISA's IT Security Officer, Arif Ahmed and AMIRS suite Operational Manager Andrew Wilson were in charge of setting up the software for the campaign. Arif commented: "With so many calls to make it was important for ISA to ensure that the University's network remained safe. Unlike some other Internet Telephony providers, Voicehost utilises SIP (Session Initiated Protocol), which has been adopted by the Voice over IP (VOIP) community as the protocol of choice and does not carry any of the security risks that are associated with other protocols like Peer to Peer (P2P)."

On looking ahead to the next telephone campaign Luke Taylor added: "We were very pleased with our decision to use Voicehost and our confidence in the software has meant we will definitely be using it again in our future fundraising efforts."

Voicehost is ISA's preferred provider of internet telephony and is available to all staff and students at the University. To use it simply register free at the Voicehost website (www.voicehost.co.uk) and download your Softphone.

You can read more about the features and benefits of Voicehost in the June edition of ISA News available on the ISA pages of the Aston web site (www.aston.ac.uk/ict/communications/newsletter).

Skype Update

Since the University wide ban on the use of Skype almost a year ago, ISA have been closely monitoring developments with the Skype Application. ISA, together with staff from the Aston Business School, have been investigating ways of producing a version that addresses the security concerns that led to the ban.

Progress in this area has been positive; ISA and ABS are now trialling a specially configured version of Skype which has been converted into a fixed package acceptable for use on the University network. We will keep you updated on this and any further developments within the Skype application as and when they occur.

Creating a healthy working environment: ISA's five a day

Director of ICT, Fahri Zihni, recognises the importance of creating a positive working environment for ISA staff. Using a variety of measures, Fahri and his team managers ensure that staff enjoy a good work-life balance and the professional and personal support they need.

Here are the top five things they do:

Flexi time scheme
This offers staff more flexibility in their working arrangements, allowing them to manage their work-life balance whilst continuing to service the needs of the University. Web Analyst, Stuart Steele uses flexi time to manage his sporting commitments: "As a competitive swimmer and triathlete time is always short, but being able to take long lunches gives me access to Aston's pool during periods which are less popular and enables me to train consistently throughout the year."

Workload Assessment Form
Managing staff workloads is the key to managing stress. Direct Services Manger, Morteza Alamolhoda, addresses this issue using Workload Assessment Forms (WAF) which allows him to identify staff who are overloaded and explore ways of fairer distribution of tasks.

Regular and informal communications
Communication between staff is the key to working effectively. To make sure that his team know everything they need to know, Strategy, Research and Security

Manger, Dennis Mottram allocates time every week to an informal catch up over coffee. Team member Arif Ahmed said: "Our team coffee sessions are really useful as they enable us to catch up with what the team are currently working on and also to get updates on any developments within the University. It is also an excellent time to voice any concerns that we may have..... and it all happens in a casual, relaxing environment over a cup of coffee and toast."

Celebrating the religious calendar
ISA benefits from a diverse workforce and Fahri Zihni is keen to acknowledge any special occasions that are important to staff. Making sure that all key religious and celebratory dates are entered into his diary, Fahri sends out an email to staff as each one comes around.

Team building through out of work socialising
To develop strong and effective working relationships, Distributed Services Manager, Jeremy Batt, encourages his team to socialise outside of work. As well as nights the team can often be seen taking on library staff in a game of football.

Reflecting on his department, Fahri is pleased with how these steps have helped create an attractive working environment for staff and is confident they will aid future recruitment and an increasingly diverse and happy workforce.

ISA Open Day

Wednesday 21st May 2008
10.00am - 4.30pm

"Personalisation and ICT"
Offering you a more personal experience

Who's it for?
All staff at Aston University, including you!

What's it all about?
The ISA Open Day gives you the chance to find out more about how Information and Communication Technology is used here at Aston and how new technologies could be used to help you in the future.

This year's theme is all about how ICT is helping to personalise our experience as users. We aim to show you how we're striving to make Aston's IT facilities more personal to you and introduce some possible future directions that may enhance your experience further. Activities will include presentations by external speakers and ISA staff as well as live demonstrations and exhibitions. And if you're still not tempted, refreshments will be available and a free prize draw at the end of the day!

When is it?
Wednesday 21st May, 10.00am – 4.30pm.

Where?
We've got so much for you to see that we're spreading the event throughout the main building including G6/8, MB117, MB118 and the ISA offices on the fourth floor.

Tell me more!
You can read more about the Open Day on the ISA pages of the website (http://www.aston.ac.uk/ict/communications/openday).

Here you'll find our programme of activities for the day which will be updated as items are confirmed. You can also read more about each activity including an overview of presentations, live demonstrations and exhibiting suppliers. In the meantime, look out for emails with more details as they are confirmed.

If you have any questions about the event, please contact **Amy Roberton**, Communications and Research Officer on **0121 204 4929** or email **robertae@aston.ac.uk.**

Free prize draw
Don't miss your chance to win some fabulous prizes including a Toshiba Camileo Pro Camcorder kindly donated by our suppliers. All visitors can enter free and the winners will be drawn out of a hat.

System Updates
The latest developments to the ICT systems and technologies you use

Aston Web site - ISA Web Team
Moving to the EasySite Content Management System

Since September last year, the web team at ISA have been working hard to migrate much of the University website to a new Content Management System (CMS) called Easysite. This is a tool that makes it easy for you to write and publish web pages and manage your website.

The migration is being carried out in stages, with individual sections of the site being moved over one at a time. As each section is migrated, staff in schools and departments are being trained to use Easysite so that they can make any necessary changes before it is published.

Despite some initial early problems with the CMS import tool, the migration is now progressing quickly. Sections of the website that are now **live on Easysite** include ISA, Research, Parents' Information and Health Centre.

More areas have been imported into EasySite and the page owners are currently checking that images and links

are correct. Many are also taking the opportunity to give their site a spring clean. The following areas are **being checked or are about to go live:**

- About Aston
- Academic Calendar
- Business Partnership Unit
- Combined Honours
- Learning and Skills Centre
- Prospective Students
- Widening Participation
- Registry

In addition, Disability Information, Open Days and Schools Liaison have also been migrated and are waiting for staff to attend training sessions before being cleaned up.

To find out when your part of the website is due to move into EasySite you can download a copy of the migration schedule from http://www.aston.ac.uk/migration/schedule (Currently, Engineering and Applied Sciences and Aston Business School websites are not part

of the initial migration project.)

Since the project started, ISA have trained over 50 staff on how to use EasySite including Web Marketing Officer, Uchenna Ndikom: "I was trained on EasySite a few weeks ago, and have found it pretty much lives up to its name! I edit a lot of web pages and the new CMS makes my job much easier. It's easy to find your way around, make changes and add new pages. If you can use Microsoft Word to write and format a document, you'll have no problems using EasySite."

To find out more about the new Content Management System, including the up-to-date migration schedule and a series of Frequently Asked Questions, visit the ISA web team blog at: http://www.aston.ac.uk/webinsight.

My Aston Portal (MAP) - Rob Welch
Latest and future developments for staff and students

Over the last couple of months there have been a number of new features for both the Student and Staff versions of MAP.

Students
- Assessment results online - students can now see results of assessments for modules. Since going live on 7th February over 5000 students have used this new feature.
- Link to the National Student Survey for qualifying final year students.

- Degree Programme 'lookup.'
- Examination timetables available for UG and PG exam periods.

Staff
- Improved Degree Transfer Process which will also work for Combined Honours students.
- Improved Student 'lookup' including assessment results.
- Module 'lookup' allowing staff to see basic details including the students taking the module and their photographs.

Future Developments
- Online student transcripts for July.

- Online enrolment for September.
- Ability for students to request standard letters (eg, Bank letter Visa letter).
- Staff process for student withdrawals.
- Staff process for Mode of Attendance and Year transfers.
- Ability for staff to search for a student using their name.
- Continuing work for online graduation registration for July.
- Automatic log-on to Blackboard from MAP.

To find out more about MAP, including a series of FAQs, visit the web site at: http://www.aston.ac.uk/ict/map.

What our students say

The latest **Student Satisfaction Results for 2007** have arrived and we'd like to share with you what students say about the computing facilities here at Aston University.

We're pleased to say that, in comparison to the last survey in 2006, ISA has held its position on the day to day provision of computing facilities and ICT support.

With an average score of 3.75 (1 being 'Very Dissatisfied' and 5 being 'Very Satisfied') our overall satisfaction level is just 0.02% down, a drop that is not considered statistically significant. Prior to this, the 2006 survey showed that satisfaction levels had increased by 0.2% compared to the previous year.

Although ISA strives to improve satisfaction levels every year, these results are positive for the department which has also been working hard to implement 8 new systems across the University (which do not form part of the survey) alongside the provision of day-to-day support surveyed. These are:

- New Student Portal (MAP)
- Email System (Exchange)
- Library Management System
- Website Content Management System (Easysite)
- Human Resources
- Payroll System
- Second phase of our Financial System
- Extension of our Timetabling systems

So far these systems have been well received by users and the department is encouraged by the progress we've been able to make whilst at the same time providing a stable provision of ICT support. The continued development of systems is eagerly anticipated and we are confident this will continue to meet the needs of students and add to their satisfaction.

What we're doing right

For the second year running, computing facilities were rated the second most used and the second most important service in the University. As such it is crucial that we strive to provide students with the facilities and support they need.

The aspects of ISA's service that students were most satisfied with were:

- Opening hours (33.9% Very Satisfied, 47.6% Satisfied)
- Reliability of PCs (17% Very Satisfied, 55.6% Satisfied)

These results are encouraging as they show that we are successfully providing students with the fundamental support they need such as access to facilities and robust equipment. The importance of this is emphasised by further results which show that the main reasons students use computing facilities are to access the internet, email and Virtual Learning Environments.

Where we can improve

The greatest area of dissatisfaction is with wire-less internet connection in University accommodation provided by Keycom Services. You can read more about our efforts to improve this on the next page.

The next two areas of dissatisfaction were printing facilities and PC availability. The results were as follows:

- Availability of printers (7.2% Very Dissatisfied, 19.6% Dissatisfied)
- Method for obtaining printer credits (6.4% Very Dissatisfied, 19.2% Dissatisfied)
- Reliability of printers (7.3% Very Dissatisfied, 14.9% Dissatisfied)
- Availability of PCs (5.3% Very Dissatisfied, 18.6% Dissatisfied)

The need to update our printing facilities has been recognised and the funding to replace the four main printers in the main building has been made available. The project is now in its implementation stage and you can read more about it on the next page.

To increase PC availability, ISA is discussing with schools the provision of further equipment being installed. In addition the information screens above the main building reception now display the number of PCs which are available for use in each PC lab.

Looking to the future, Fahri recognises the need to continually improve and raise students' overall satisfaction over the coming year:

"When the major new systems developments reach a position of stability and other printers across the University are upgraded, we would expect our student satisfaction ratings to go up considerably. In the meantime, we need to learn from these surveys and respond to the needs of our customers."

Improving our service

Service Desk Manager, **Stephen Colden** and Network Services Manager, **Trevor Bayliss** take us through how we aim to improve student printing facilities and wireless internet connection in residencies.

Student Printing
by Stephen Colden

Steve with some of the printing equipment we'll be replacing.

Three major improvements are planned during the remainder of this year:

Change from a push to pull approach

The current print system works on what is called a 'Push Print' basis. This means that documents are sent (pushed) to specific printers by the user. The document is held at the printer until the student identifies himself, releasing it for printing. This can create queues on high demand printers and a printer failure will jam all print jobs waiting.

To improve this we are changing to a "Pull" approach. Instead of printing to a specific printer, documents are printed to a server where they are held. The student can then choose to print from a convenient device and when the student identifies himself to that printer their document is pulled to it and printed. This offers greater printing choice, helps to reduce queues and allows alternative printers to be used if one fails.

Printer replacement

We also aim to replace our existing, aging, printers with new models. These will be provided by the company "Kyocera Mita" and should be more reliable and experience fewer typical printer errors such as paper jams.

Green Printing

Kyocera Mita is also an environmentally conscious company committed to low impact products. Their printers are significantly more energy efficient and include longer life recyclable parts that reduces the number of times they need to be changed. You can read more on Kyocera Mita's approach to green issues at www.kyoceramita.co.uk/footprint.

Simplified payment

The current process for topping up printer credits is complicated and inconvenient. Three different approaches are used across campus, some require that printing credit is held on a card (lose the card and lose the credit), and the times when credit can be added to the card is restricted.

To improve this, ISA are looking to reduce the number of printing systems from 3 to 2 (by losing the Flexi-card system currently used by the LHS printers and the central copier printer in MB476) and introduce an electronic payment system which will hold the printing credit and allow top-ups 24 hours a day over the web.

When will all this happen?

These improvements will be gradually implemented and we aim to have them completed before the start of the next academic year. To begin with we need to implement new "back-office" systems that will not change the procedures that students currently follow. Once in place, we can then start rolling out the 'Follow Me' system that provides the "pull" and payment approaches.

Watch this space for updates on our progress!

Wireless in Residencies
by Trevor Bayliss

The Guild, senior officers of the University and ISA have been meeting with Keycom to resolve outstanding problems in the Residencies. Although there have been some improvements at the end of last year, these fall quite short of our students' expectations and we are pursuing the company vigorously to address the problems.

ISA is monitoring the technical aspects of the Keycom facility by visiting different areas and recoding bandwidth, login and download speeds in different areas.

The Guild and Residential Services are bringing complaints from individual students to the attention of Keycom.

While the work Keycom are doing to improve its service goes on, ISA are continuing to provide more wireless hotspots across the campus.

We are targeting the areas with the most urgent need for internet access and installing University Wireless Access (W-ISA). To supplement Keycom provision, ISA has just completed the installation of W-ISA wireless systems in the Common/TV Rooms of Lawrence, Stafford and Dalton Towers and outside Lawrence Tower between Bishop Ryder and Vauxhall House. These are already proving very popular with our students.

In order to make W-ISA access areas more visible, ISA are also working with marketing to provide signage to indicate the presence of W-ISA hotspots in and around the campus.

While there are still areas of the University which aren't covered by W-ISA, we are continually striving to improve coverage and welcome any suggestions for areas which could benefit from W-ISA.

Send your suggestions to: isa_networking@aston.ac.uk.

Living the game

We talk to ISA's Nic Doran about what it's like organising Live Role Playing Events

Q. What are Live Role Playing Events (LRP)?
A. Have you ever heard of tabletop role playing games such a Dungeons and Dragons? Here players sit round a table, create a character for the game and then verbally describe their character's actions as they play. A Live Role Playing Event is an extension of this in that, instead of sitting round a table, you physically play the character you created. This means dressing up in costume and interacting with other players. Instead of describing your character's actions, you perform them. It's kind of like being in a theatre production except there is no audience and everyone makes up their lines as they go along!

Q. How did you get involved?
A. I first got into it 14 years ago when I was a student here at Aston University. To begin with I just went to pre-organised events that were taking place across the country but after a while I decided I wanted to have a go at organising one myself. Since then I've organised over 50 events myself and helped to organise over 20 others.

Q. So what does organising an LRP Event involve?
A. A lot! Live Role Playing Events can be massive, attended by anything from 100 to 4000 people and lasting anywhere between a few hours and a few days. Organising just one event can take between 3 and 6 months so you can imagine the amount of work involved.

Q. Take us through some of the things you'd do…
A. Well first of all you have to write the plot and this alone can take up to two weeks. Although LRP Events have no script they do have a plotline which provides a rough outline of what will happen during the event. Participants then react to these events in their own way based on their characters.

Q. That must be quite unpredictable though?
A. It can be, yes. Sometimes participants will react in a totally unexpected way, changing the direction of the story and meaning lots of last minute improvisation for us!

Q. So what do you do next?
A. Once the plot is finished I move on to the logistics of the event such as finding a suitable site for the story, organising equipment, arranging accommodation, catering and first aid – not to mention advertising the event and selling tickets! Then once that's done, I start creating the props and characters that will interact with the players.

Photograph by Chiara Mac Call

Q. Did you say c*reate*?
A. That's right – costumes, prosthetics, make up jobs, special effects – the more realistic the set and the characters look, the greater the experience for the players.

Q. What sort of things do you create?
A. Whatever is needed. Weapons, body parts, a half peeled face, or simply a costume made from old rags. LRP can be based on any theme such as fantasy, horror, historical, science fiction, mythological, or even military so the props and costumes needed vary each event.

Q. Where did you learn how to do that?
A. I just learnt it as I went along.

Q. Do you take part in the events you organise?
A. Not in my own as organising them requires you to be 'back stage' for most of the event, however as many other people organise events I take part in some of theirs.

Q. And what's the best thing about it?
A. Complete escapism – it's nothing to do with work and there's no IT in sight!

Telling me what you think

As your newsletter I want to make sure that ISA News offers you the information you want in the way that you want it. If you have any comments about the content, format and presentation of ISA News or any suggestions about how we can improve it for you, then please contact me, Amy Roberton, on **0121 204 4929** or email **robertae@aston.ac.uk.**

Look out for the next edition on Monday 9th June 2008.