Change of platform for the Access Grid Network

AMSI has adopted the policy that the existing network of Access Grid rooms that are currently sharing research and teaching in the mathematical sciences replaces the current Access Grid software with Visimeet as the new platform for the AMSI network activities. A new software platform will enable to sustain the network into the future and deliver additional benefits en better operational flexibility. AMSI is happy to bear most of the cost of this change-over.

The case for change

- The international support base for the use, support and further development of Access Grid software has disappeared. The last release of updated AGR software (Access Grid 3.2) dates back to 2010. ANL, the developer of Access Grid, withdrew support a few years ago. Access Grid networks in the UK and the US have moved away from Access Grid.
- The Australian user community has always received fantastic underlying support for Access Grid, for free and on a voluntary basis. Unfortunately the individuals involved no longer have the time to deliver that support as they have in the past.
- Access Grid software itself is not very user friendly and there are well-documented issues around firewalls and Multicast/Unicast. In general, it requires quite a high level of technical knowledge to run sessions. It also requires support staff to be on constant stand by to troubleshoot.
- Some universities have centralised their IT services, endangering the reliable support required to run Access Grid sessions. Other universities have even decommissioned their Access Grid rooms altogether (although the dedicated rooms in Maths and Stats areas have so far been spared), leaving the departments who used to book these rooms suddenly without any access to AGR facilities.
- At the same time, due to some new initiatives such as the AGR National Seminar Series, and wider marketing of existing initiatives, there is increased interest from departments and individuals to attend AGR events even if they do not (or no longer) have access to a nearby AGR. There is a need to provide broader access via desktop and laptop computers.
- While the Access Grid software has not changed for years, new videoconferencing products have come on to the market that deliver similar functionality to Access Grid and are more user friendly.

For the Access Grid network to remain a sustainable and thriving support for higher education and research in the mathematical sciences, we need to make a transition to a new platform that is easier to support and allows for broader access. We prefer to do this without undue disruption to the existing infrastructure. After researching various options and comprehensive trials, we have come to the conclusion that Visimeet will offer the best solution.

Why Visimeet?

- Visimeet is a software-based videoconferencing tool. The existing hardware in the AMSI network can remain in place. This is not to say that no hardware changes will be required at all. However, the most important change would be to change the room operation from two machines to one if it is not running on one machine already (as Visimeet runs on one machine).
- Visimeet, having started off as an overlay for Access Grid, has enhanced functionality when compared to Access Grid: it allows for multiple video streams as well as desktop and presentation sharing.
- It is easy to use and does not require the same level of technical support as Access Grid. Local users can use a scheduling tool to set up Visimeet sessions.
- Visimeet is reliable and does not have the same issues with firewalls and Multicast/Unicast.
- Visimeet includes a bridge for interoperability with traditional conferencing systems and phones.

- Support and ongoing maintenance services are guaranteed.
- Access by web/desktop/laptop/handheld device is easy to arrange.
- It is a proven product. Geoff has had contact with the JANET and the mathematics network in the UK, as the JANET network has performed an in-depth comparison of rival platforms and chosen Visimeet as the best platform to replace Access Grid. They have indicated to us that they are happy with the reliability, stability and user friendliness of the software. The service quality is excellent.

We have conducted a trial of the software, which included a session with multiple rooms. On the basis of this experience and the experiences in the UK, we are confident that this is the best way forward. Information on the functionality of Visimeet and how it works is attached – for further questions please do not hesitate to contact Maaike Wienk at agr@amsi.org.au or George Travan at george@azprin.com.

Costing

IOCOM Visimeet is offered in Australia through Azprin. There are 3 types of licence available: room licences, Personal Plus licences and student licences (see the information attached). For an up-to-date quote for room and workstation licences please contact Maaike Wienk at agr@amsi.org.au.

Room license (most suitable for departments with a current Access Grid Room)

Year 1 – Licence and installation	Annual fee from Year 2 onwards
Price available upon request	Price available upon request, around 20% of licence fee (subject to currency fluctuations)

This includes a perpetual Visimeet licence for a room with multiple outgoing and incoming video streams and desktop sharing. The room licence enables comprehensive teaching and seminar delivery and meeting setups. The initial licence fee and annual fee include ongoing support and maintenance by IOCOM, complemented by local support by Azprin. Additional specialised support services by Azprin are not included but are available by negotiation.

Workstation licence (Suitable for small and portable setups)

Year 1 –Licence and installation	Annual fee from Year 2 onwards
Price available upon request	Price available upon request, around 20% of licence fee (subject to currency fluctuations)

This includes a perpetual Visimeet "Personal Plus" licence for a desktop with one outgoing video stream (which would allow multiple cameras to be added if a videomixer is used), multiple incoming video streams and desktop sharing. It is suitable for small meetings as well as participation in remote events. The initial licence fee and annual fee include ongoing support and maintenance by IOCOM, complemented by local support by Azprin. Additional specialised support services by Azprin are not included but are available by negotiation.

AMSI will separately licence and host the required Visimeet Server. Server licensing will include the AMSI room licence as well as 10 Personal Plus licences and 10 student licences:

1. The Personal Plus licences will be made available to departments currently without a room, for the fee indicated above. Please note that when these licences sell out, additional Personal Plus licences are available at a slightly higher price (see above).
2. Student licenses (and any Personal Plus licences not taken up by departments) can be given out on an event-by-event basis to individuals (students, researchers, mathematicians aligned to the AMSI members institutions) who do not have access to videoconferencing facilities.
3. AMSI will also organise and pay for training, in collaboration with Azprin.
4. If the initial cost of a room licence is prohibitive, please contact AMSI – funds might become available to subsidize room licence fees.

Rollout

We have included a rough timeline below where the transition takes place over the summer period, so that the updated network is ready to go before teaching starts in first semester of 2015.

AGR Steering Committee meeting	20 October 2014
Proposal sent to AMSI member departments	20 October 2014
Deadline for take-up of licences	1 December 2014
Installation period Visimeet- including testing	1 December 2014 – 22 February 2015
Ready for start of semester 1 2015	23 February 2015