Manchester Computing Wins Bid to Host the Access Grid Support Centre

Michael Daw
Access Grid Support Centre Manager

Regular readers of CSAR Focus will be familiar by now with Access Grid. Manchester built the first node in the UK and has been prominent in SC Global and in the worldwide Access Grid development community.

Growth of UK Access Grid

The number of Access Grid nodes in the UK is increasing fast. From an initial rollout of 12 nodes, there are now over 20, with more being commissioned and installed every month as new institutions and disciplines realise the potential of this technology. The University of Manchester itself is committed to building another six nodes across campus as part of the investment in e-Science North West, the aim being to encourage all disciplines to play their full part in the potential of e-Science.

Initially, support for Access Grid was informal – the number of sites in the UK was small enough for there to be a recognisable community where everyone helped each other. However, with the number of sites rising quickly, there has been a need for a more formal support solution.

Manchester Wins Bid for AGSC

And so the Access Grid Support Centre (AGSC) was born, following a successful bid by the University of Manchester. The bid was supported by every one of the National and Regional e-Science Centres, which shows how our expertise has been acknowledged and recognised by the rest of the community. UKERNA oversee and manage service provision, as they do for the related JANET Videoconferencing Service (JVCS). The attraction of the original bid was enhanced by our proposal to make use of the CSAR Frontline helpdesk as first line of support for the AGSC.

On-Demand Support and Training

The AGSC provides on-demand support for users and potential users, addressing topics such as procurement advice, help on AGSC services and general troubleshooting. A major role is to give in-depth training through a series of courses, which covers issues from introductions to Access Grid through to debugging and fault-finding techniques.

Quality Assurance Tests

The AGSC also run Quality Assurance (QA) tests to aim for improvements in the perceived quality for users. QA tests check audio, video and network quality at remote nodes, as well as areas specific to Access Grid (as opposed to traditional videoconference) facilities, such as use of the Multi User Domain (MUD) – text chat software used for sideband conversations – and shared presentation software.

AGSC Services

In addition to this, the AGSC operates a number of services for registered users to improve the Access Grid experience. A Virtual Venue Server supports UK-only venues in addition to the standard venues. A persistent Multicast-Unicast Bridge helps those sites which do not yet have multicast enabled, or which are experiencing difficulties in this area. For the first time for many UK sites, the AGSC offers IG Pix, which allows the presentation of Microsoft PowerPoint over a web browser without the need to distribute slides beforehand. IG Pix is easy to use and receiving sites have no need for specialised client software. Also available is a facility to record meetings and an experimental (i.e. not production quality) Access Grid/H.323 Bridge. These services run on software written by InSORS Communications Inc.

Supporting Collaboration

It is anticipated that in the coming years, collaborative tools will come to be developed that enhance, or that can be used alongside, the Access Grid. The AGSC is likely to be a major player in ensuring that these tools are rolled out so that users of Access Grid facilities can extract maximum benefit from them. The aim of the AGSC is to help the UK to fully realise the potential of Access Grid as a tool for highly effective remote collaboration.

For more information, see http://www.agsc.ja.net