

Engaging with open source: 1 November 2005

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OSS Watch

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- What is open source software?
- Reasons institutions consider open source software
- Examples of open source software in use
- UK Government policy on open source software
- JISC policy on open source software
- Building a sensible institutional policy

OSS Watch: the UK open source software advisory service

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OSS Watch provides unbiased advice and guidance on free and open source software for UK higher and further education.

- strategic IT decision-makers
- IT managers and technical staff
- software developers
- academic end-users

OSS Watch is funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and based within the Research Technologies Service at the University of Oxford.

OSS Watch is *not* an advocacy group. There are many other groups across the world who fulfil the advocacy function, e.g.:

- Free Software Foundation
- Open Forum Europe
- SchoolForgeUK
- and many more

OSS Watch's role is to promote awareness and understanding of the legal, social and economic issues that arise when educational institutions engage with free and open source software.

OSS Watch's key focus for 2005-6 is *sustainability*.

- 10-12 April 2006 **Sustainability and Open Source Software** Oxford

Mark your diaries

What does "open source" mean?

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Open source software is software released under an Open Source Initiative (OSI) certified licence.

There are currently 58 OSI certified open source licences.

The OSI is **not** a legislative body. Its authority resides entirely in the fact that the open source community

- recognizes it as the maintainer of the Open Source Definition (OSD)
- is willing to participate in the OSI certification process
- has not set up a viable alternative

Criteria of the Open Source Definition

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- free redistribution
- source code
- derived works
- integrity of the author's source code
- no discrimination against persons or groups
- no discrimination against fields of endeavour
- distribution of licence
- licence must not be specific to a product
- licence must not restrict other software
- licence must be technology-neutral

Reasons institutions consider open source software

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The top 3 reasons given in our 2003 national survey:

- cost
- interoperability
- security

Interoperability was the number one reason for higher education.

Other reasons that institutions consider open source software

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- skillsets
- continuing professional development
- avoidance of lock-in
- hardware life-cycle
- open source is *mainstream*

What does "mainstream" mean?

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There is no useful definition of *mainstream* but some helpful markers might be:

- IT departments use it regularly
- governments encourage its use
- research councils fund its development
- schools begin using it
- the BBC uses and develops it
- your granny uses Firefox

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Examples of open source software in use

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- Moodle - 6317 registered Moodle sites in over 130 countries
- Request Tracker
- Linux (various distros)
- Apache Web Server - 69.89% of web servers run Apache, October 2005 - Netcraft
- MySQL
- OpenOffice - supports the OASIS standard Open Document Format
- Firefox - more than 90 million downloads
- numerous others

UK government open source policy

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The principal document setting the context for open source in the UK is

- Open Source Software: Use within UK Government, version 2, 28 October 2004

Also of note:

- Open source software trials in government - final report, 28 October 2004
- BECTA report on open source software in schools, 13 May 2005
- Open Source Academy - funded by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
- JISC open source policy

UK government open source policy (2)

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The open source policy **does not** mandate the use of open source software either in procurement funded by the government, or as a licensing model for research and development outputs.

It does identify it as one possible route for exploitation and as a comparative to consider in procurement.

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On 13 May 2005 BECTA issued a report on open source software in schools.

The report concluded that *open source can offer a cost effective alternative to proprietary software.*

JISC open source policy

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JISC policy is an implementation of the UK government policy. Again, it **does not** mandate the use of open source software. It also **does not** insist that software outputs from JISC funding be released under an open source licence.

It does, however, require projects to declare the exploitation route for software outputs at the start of a project, and to justify the licence choice for those outputs.

In effect, this is merely an example of good practice in software development.

The BBC does open source

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The BBC both uses open source software and releases software under open source licences.

The various BBC open source projects have been brought together at one site <http://www.bbc.co.uk/opensource/>

Open source software development is an extension of our Public Service remit. Releasing open source software helps our audience get additional value from the work they've funded, and also get tools for free that they couldn't get any other way. It also allows people outside the BBC to extend projects in such a way that may in future be used in the BBC.

Building a sensible institutional policy

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The first question is always:

- do you have an IT strategy in place

A consideration for open source software is **part** of your institutional IT strategy - **not** a replacement for it.

IT strategies are built around the issues of

- security
- interoperability
- accessibility
- integration
- future proofing

An explicit statement that an institution will examine open source alternatives in each procurement process or substantial IT decision helps the focus stay firmly on the strategic requirements.

Cost is an implementation issue.

Mainstream reconsidered

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Even if open source software has entered the mainstream,
this is **not** a good reason in itself to choose it.
And the same applies to proprietary software.

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For more information on open source software development and deployment, visit <http://www.oss-watch.ac.uk/> or write to info@oss-watch.ac.uk