

11. Using free software

The principles of free software are explained at Web sites such as <http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.html> and <http://www.fsfeurope.org>.

Free Software is often referred to as Open Source. These terms are generally (and in this document) used interchangeably, although there are debates about which name should prevail. The freedom that Free Software refers to is being allowed to read and learn from the source code, and to modify the software as needed.

Free Software, or Open Source should not be confused with Freeware. Freeware is software that is free, but the source code is not available. It is usually free because the programmer has abandoned the project. Useful Open Source programs will continue to improve and be supported if the original programmer(s) abandon the project, because the source code is available

The free-software movement is growing fast, and becoming more successful. Universities can save money by using Open Source software where it makes sense, not only because it is usually free but also because the source code can be modified, as was done at Moratuwa and Zululand. In this regard, see also Makerere University's 'Make or Buy Policy' (Appendix D).

Free software is available for the following reasons:

- An organization such as a university may write a piece of software for its own purposes and, because it is not a commercial company, release it in the public domain. This enables programmers from other institutions to improve the software, which also benefits the original institution.
- Programmers may write free software and make it available (including the source code) to the wider world. When it becomes popular, they are able to make money by adapting the software on request. For example, if a company that is using the software needs a specific feature, it can pay the programmers to add that feature.
- Software is written for dedicated devices. Hewlett-Packard, for example, supports the Samba project (see below), because they use Samba in their high-end print-server devices. They sell hardware but use free software, and therefore have an interest in developing that free-software project. Similarly, the free Linux operating system is used in a multitude of commercial communications, routing and firewall products. These companies support the development of Linux with financial contributions.

As with commercial software, there are good and bad Open Source products available. However, free-software projects typically do have very good support. An institution can commit to free software as a policy, or use only the free software that works for them. However, an organization that never uses free software is likely to be wasting money. Notable free-software products include the Apache Web server (which runs 60% of all Web sites on the Internet), MySQL (which provides the database power for most database-driven Web sites), the Linux and BSD operating systems, Samba (which enables organizations to use a Unix or Linux server as a file and print server and domain controller for a domain of Windows computers), as well as the free C, Python, Perl and PHP programming languages, and the OpenOffice office suite.

A very large number of Free Software projects are hosted (and available for download) at SourceForge - <http://sf.net>