OSS Watch

Developing
University
Policies That
Engage with
Open Source
Software

Stuart Yeates
and Sebastian
Rahtz

Developing University Policies That Engage with Open Source Software

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OSS Watch, Oxford University Computing Services, UK

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- The JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) coordinates educational IT structures in the UK. Directly funded by the state at the same level as research councils.
- JISC runs the physical network for HE and FE, provides services, and funds applied research.
- OSS Watch is funded initially from 2003-2006 as a UK national Open Source Advisory Service.
- OSS Watch has 3.25 FTE based in Oxford University Computing Services' *Research Technologies* section.

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

OSS Watch is not an open source advocacy group.

Introduction

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- In some countries (Brazil, Peru, etc.), open source seems to be making headway from the top down, by political decree.
- In some countries (South Africa, etc.), open source seems to be making headway under heavy sponsorship from individuals.
- In some countries (United States), open source seems to be making headway sponsored by a plethora of businesses.
- In education in the UK, open source is making headway though consensus building and education.

Each of these has a different set of advantages and disadvantages.

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Consensus is at the very core of open source.

- Slow
- Every single decision maker needs to be kept in the loop
- The point of view of every single decision maker needs to be taken into account
- Never total
- Long term consensus values honesty over marketing

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What do all of these have in common?

Unicode, ASCII, XML, FAT, TCP/IP, HTTP, POSIX, C, OpenDocument, PDF and SQL.

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There are legitimate business reasons for companies to research, develop and publish new open standards in software.

There is no conflict between open standards and large companies, between open source and large companies or between open source and making profits.

There is a conflict between open standards and open source and a very narrow set of business models, those in which software is developed speculatively and the investment recouped by charging licensing fees.

Documents

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The open source policies we have written are built of current practice, best practice and legal obligation, woven into a coherent fabric and heavily annotated with ways in which people are already fulfilling, or could easily fulfill the requirements.

Focus on open standards, as the fallback when open source is unviable.

Stakeholders

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On both a macro and a micro level accommodation is
required for those who:

- have signed very long contracts with closed source
  vendors
- have a track record of making money from selling
  software licences
- have user needs that can only be met with closed
  source
- outsource their training, support, development work

Solutions

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- no new requirements on participants
- illustrate how to meet existing requirements in both the closed and open source approaches
- be informative in exactly the way that legal advice isn't
- be ready to provide the hand-holding that some participants are going to need, and be ready to provide it on their own terms

Process

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- Talk to people and listen to what they have to say
- Keep a list of 'hard' cases and discuss them openly
- Strive to be apolitical

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Two open source policies, one for the JISC, who are our
funding body and one for Oxford University. Neither
mandate open source across the board, both will make it
significantly easier for a wide range of units and individuals
to develop, deploy and use open source.