



Open Schools Alliance

- Global technological change means changing the way software procurement is approached.
- Current procurement frameworks in the education sector are based on dated and dangerous assumptions about software markets.
- Becta's own figures suggest Open Source offers savings of up to 60% for schools, yet the procurement frameworks ignore this and often block SMEs specialising in Open Source from participating.
- Framework agreements reduce risks associated with the financial stability of SMEs but ignore the risks posed by large companies and proprietary software lock-in.
- Put the taxpayer and schools first and the supply industry firmly second. Adopt active strategies to reduce dependency on monopolies and to stimulate and promote open standards and open technologies.

Procurement frameworks for schools from the DfES and Becta are costing money and stifling innovation. By enforcing outdated assumptions about how the software market works, they lock out Open Source Software. Respected research company IDC says that Open Source development is the biggest change taking place in the global software industry since the 1980s, yet there is no strategy to exploit this in our schools.

ICT procurement in education has failed to raise standards to anything like levels that could justify the money spent. Around £350m has been spent on eLearning Credits but Content Advisory Board report (2005) says "eLCs ... have probably not led to a step change in the level of innovation embodied in digital content used in the classroom."

Open Source Software offers an opportunity to achieve such a step change and save money in the process, yet the DfES and Becta merely pay lip-service to it.

Save more with Open Source Software

Becta is the body tasked by the DfES with advising schools on ICT. Recent Becta procurement frameworks choose companies in advance to supply schools. This approval provides a market benefit to such companies, giving a government quality stamp.

Such lists are very dangerous in a rapidly changing technological world where up-and-coming specialist and innovative companies do not have the resources to go through the applications process or are excluded on the grounds of turnover. Many are new to the market and so don't have the required track record or are unfamiliar with the application process. The current methods are a recipe for stagnation, locking out newcomers and entrenching those with the biggest interest in maintaining the status quo.

The framework approach assumes implicitly that software is bought and sold through proprietary licensing when globally the trend is in the opposite direction. This results in market distortion in favour of companies with business models predicated on selling proprietary licensed software and against those with business models that do not operate in this way.

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Beyond the frameworks

Unless the existing frameworks are revised to reflect the impact Open Source Software and Open Standards are having on the global stage, we run the risk of falling behind other countries.

Newer commercial models promise to cut costs, provide greater opportunities for learners to participate in their own resource development and stimulate more innovation in learning resources. The supply industry will re-order itself once government removes frameworks that are inherently stacked to support a dated a largely discredited commercial model.

Government policy from the Cabinet Office says "UK Government will seek to avoid lock-in to proprietary IT products and services". Existing procurement frameworks make no attempts to avoid lock-in. The e-strategy for education would benefit from a much enhanced role for Open Source communities and support for growing new communities to spawn new innovation from grass roots.

The expertise exists to make these reforms workable; what is required is the political leadership to give them a priority. Develop a firm commitment to improving technology procurement in education such that the education of the children comes first, followed by best value for the tax payer.