

Abstract: Free Technology Academy

Introducing the problem: Free Software, also known as open source or libre software, allows the code to be used freely, which means that it can be used, copied, studied, modified and redistributed without restrictions. Free Software, as opposed to proprietary software, offers the freedom to learn and to teach without engaging in dependencies on any single technology provider. This freedom of choice is considered a basic condition for an autonomous person in the information society.

The expansion of Free Software has brought together a continually growing global community of developers, by offering solid quality products that have not gone unnoticed in business, government and academic circles. Big players such as Novell, IBM and SUN have brought Free Software into their business models, and many more SMEs provide professional services around free software. The European Commission and many national, regional and local governments have started adopting open standards and show a preference for Free Software to cover their IT needs.

Although there is a growing interest in free technologies (Free Software and Open Standards), still a limited number of IT professionals, teachers and decision makers have sufficient knowledge and expertise in these fields. This is particularly problematic since these are crucial actors in promoting and implementing free technologies.

Solving the problem: In order to tackle this problem, the Free Technology Academy (FTA) will be set up as a distance learning programme. This distance learning programme will consist of specific modules to enable IT professionals, students, teachers and decision makers to upgrade knowledge and acquire relevant skills on free technologies. Those users interested in getting a master degree could complete their study and get a master degree at one of the universities engaged in the Free Technology Academy.

Defining the FTA: The FTA's main goals are twofold. First, to set up a virtual campus offering course modules on Free Software and Open Standards with teaching staff from the participating institutions; and second, to become a showcase of a virtual campus based on FS, OS and the use of Open Educational Resources, in order to promote its use in other institutions. The programme will acquire its shape through close cooperation between higher education institutions and social and private organisations.

To this end a virtual campus will be created where open educational materials will be made available and users will be able to follow specific modules on: 1) the Introduction to Free Software and Open Standards; 2) the GNU/Linux

Quick facts about the FTA

- Virtual Campus with online classrooms
- for IT professionals, students, teachers and decision makers
- on Free Software + Open Standards
- only freely licensed materials
- a full master programme can be completed at one of the universities
- the FTA is organised by the universities OU (Netherlands), UOC (Spain), ISCTE (Portugal) and coordinated by the FKI (Netherlands)

Unlocking the knowledge society



Operating System; 3) Network Technologies; 4) Web Applications development; 5) Economical models; 6) Legal aspects of the Information Society; 7) Software development and 8) Case studies.

Educational materials in the FTA will be released under free licenses in line with the philosophy of the free knowledge and open educational resources movement. The educational content necessary to complete the curriculum will be developed using the SELF platform, a tool for the collaborative development of educational materials. These materials will comply with dominant open standards such as SCORM and IMS, thus enabling the seamless exchange with other educational platforms.

Organising the FTA: The FTA is organised by the FTA Consortium led by the Free Knowledge Institute in collaboration with the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, the Open University Netherlands and the Instituto Superior de Ciencias do Trabalho e da Empresa in Portugal.

The Free Knowledge Institute will coordinate the project while the universities will bring into the FTA their teaching experience (distance learning, educational materials and teachers) and technical support for setting up the virtual campus. While the FTA will benefit from the experience of these three universities, the universities will benefit from the FTA by jointly developing and translating materials and attracting new students for their master programmes.

Moreover, the FTA will work in tight collaboration with the SELF Platform for the creation of new educational materials. In the future other educational institutions (including vocational education and higher education) will be invited to participate as well as industry partners specialised in the area of training in free technologies. The final goal is to include partners at different levels of education and training, and in different fields.

Setting up the FTA: The start up of the FTA will take two years. In the first year, the focus will be on: a) building up the virtual campus; 2) selecting, adapting and translating the initial course modules; 3) developing examination and certification materials; and 4) selecting and preparing teaching staff.

In the second year, a pilot will be run with a selected group of users and promotional activities will be developed (such as informative lectures and a communication campaign) in order to attract a sufficient number of students for the third year. Moreover, an associate partner network will be set up to include other partners at different levels of education and training.

Funding: The start up of the FTA is co-funded by the EC Lifelong Learning Programme. Additionally, the Consortium will seek for national and local partners to expand and fortify the initial programme. In the medium and long run, the FTA should be self sustainable by the income generated from the courses.

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References

- SELF (Science, Education and Learning in Freedom) project:

<http://selfproject.eu>



- Free Knowledge Institute:

<http://freeknowledge.eu>



- Universitat Oberta de Catalunya:

<http://uoc.edu>



- Open University Netherlands:

<http://ou.nl>

OpenUniversiteitNederland

- Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa:

<http://iscte.pt>

