

Launch of global initiative to promote free school software

Called 'Schoolforge', it will provide teaching content and case studies on developing Linux-based applications in schools. CHUA HUI MIN has the details

MORE than 30 volunteer groups worldwide, including the Linux Users' Group (Singapore), announced last week that they would pool technical and curricula resources to fan the development of free educational software.

The initiative, called 'Schoolforge', will provide teaching content, case studies on developing Linux-based applications in schools, and free software - plus the code behind it - through www.schoolforge.net.

Its members include SEUL/edu (a discussion group on the use of Linux in schools), educational journal Open Source Schools, the Free Software Foundation (which offers a host of free software licences and articles), the Associazione Italiana per l'Informatica ed i Calcolo Automatico, the Belize Linux User Group, the Greek Research and Technology Network, and Linux in Education (Turkey).

Harish Pillay, president of the Linux Users' Group (Singapore), told BizIT the initiative seeks to coordinate volunteer efforts worldwide in developing school software projects. It also aims to increase the awareness of software options that do not rely on proprietary operating systems and standards, which may make it difficult for users to exchange information across different platforms.

'The point is to inform people about alternatives, so they're not led into costly software and hardware upgrades out of ignorance,' Mr Pillay said. 'For instance, if standards such as file formats are owned by just one company, it would be difficult to share documents using different word programs, or even different versions of the same vendor's software.'

'Users may mistakenly think they have little choice but to buy a particular program or the latest version of the software. Or they may end up buying new hardware to meet the additional requirements of newer software whether or not warranted,' he added.

Advocates of free software object to the latest proposed settlement for the anti-trust case against Microsoft in the US, announced in November 2001, which could see the software giant's product installed in more than 12,000 schools in the US.

The Seattle giant, which has been embroiled in a three-and-a-half-year antitrust battle with the US government, was judged in June 2000 to have more than 80 per cent of the desktop operating systems market. In August 2001, Bill Gates announced at the Las Vegas Consumer Electronics Show that its latest OS, Microsoft XP, had sold over 17 million licences since its launch.

Some sources estimate that there are between 12 million and 18 million users of the Linux OS, whose source code is freely distributed. According to a 1999 Netcraft survey, more than 60 per cent of all public Internet websites used the Apache web server, another open source program which runs on the Linux OS.