Frequently Asked Questions

Who is involved in LAMS? What are their roles?

There are three main entities involved in the Learning Activity Management System (LAMS). All are based in Sydney, Australia in affiliation with Macquarie University.

The LAMS Foundation Ltd is a not for profit company limited by guarantee. LAMS Foundation owns the LAMS software and related intellectual property. A Board of Directors, including James Dalziel and representatives of Macquarie University, currently manages the LAMS Foundation. In the future, it is anticipated that additional Board members will be added, particularly from non-commercial organisations that would like to be involved in the strategic direction of the Foundation and contribute significant funding towards its goals. The LAMS Foundation is a "virtual organisation", in that it has a Board of Directors and enters into various development and licensing agreements, but has no employees in its own right.

LAMS International Pty Ltd is a commercial services company set up to assist with implementation and technical support for LAMS, working in conjunction with the LAMS Foundation. It has the right to offer LAMS Beta Partner Program licenses and LAMS support services, as well as commercial (ie, non GPL) licenses for LAMS on behalf of the LAMS Foundation. In exchange, development of the core LAMS software by LAMS International Pty Ltd is owned by LAMS Foundation. LAMS International follows open source business models similar to those of companies like Red Hat Linux and MySQL.

The Macquarie University E-learning Centre of Excellence (MELCOE) is a dedicated research centre focussed on e-learning technology and standards development within Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. Professor James Dalziel (the inventor of LAMS) is the Director of MELCOE. MELCOE provides core R&D for the ongoing development of LAMS.

For historical completeness, it is worth noting a fourth entity — WebMCQ Pty Ltd — an Australian commercial e-learning company. WebMCQ collaborated with Macquarie University on the initial development of LAMS (based on the original conceptual work of James Dalziel and Donna Gibbs). In late 2003, WebMCQ agreed to transfer all intellectual property in LAMS to the LAMS Foundation, and the LAMS team at WebMCQ moved to MELCOE. Since this transfer, WebMCQ has had no further role in LAMS, and none of the staff that moved from WebMCQ to MELCOE have any ongoing role with WebMCQ.

Is LAMS free? When will it be freely available?

Not yet — but it will be. The LAMS software will be released as "open source software" (using the GPL) in late February 2005. From this time onwards, anyone who wishes to take the publicly available software source code, and then compile it, install it, configure it and maintain it can use LAMS without incurring any fees. For many users, it may be more cost effective to have LAMS International (the LAMS services and support company) provide support services to handle all of this for a modest fee, but this decision is up to each potential user — there is no compulsion to pay anything for using LAMS if you abide by the requirements of the GPL (the LAMS open source software license).

Prior to the release of the open source code in February 2005, the only way to get access to LAMS immediately is via the services offered by LAMS International, such as the LAMS Beta Partner Program. These services provide the LAMS software without any licensing fee, but include fees for support services to assist with deploying LAMS. This means that any trials of LAMS between July 2004 and February 2005 will require payment of some fees in the form of support services. After February 2005, it will no longer be necessary to pay support fees to gain access to LAMS.

What is "open source software"? What is the "GPL"?

Open source software is a term used to describe software where the source code (the fundamental instructions that make the software work) is publicly available to view, modify and use without charge. It is part of a widespread movement in software development that has proved successful at producing significant, robust and secure software. Two of the best-known examples of open source software are the Linux operating system, and the Apache web server, both of which are widely used globally today. Open source software is also known as "free software", and although open source software is usually provided without charge, the meaning of "free" here is as in "freedom", not as in without charge ("free as in freedom, not free as in beer").

Open source software is provided to users on the terms specified in the license that accompanies the software code. While there are now many different open source licenses available, there are two major categories, the "BSD" style license, and the "GPL" style license (eg, the GNU General Public License or "GPL"). In addition to the general concept of publicly viewable software code, both types of licenses are based on requirements that use of the software must be acknowledged in some form, and a disclaimer of any kind of liability for using the software.

The key difference between these licenses is that the GPL (but not the BSD) requires that any additions to the software made by third parties must also be released as open source software under the same terms as the original license (ie, the GPL) if the additions are distributed. This requirement normally helps to encourage a viable, growing community of developers contributing to the growth of the software from a common basis. This community development can also occur with BSD style licenses, although there is no license requirement on developers to "require" them to make their additions available to the community under the same license as the original system if they distribute their additions. The GPL requirement described above is sometimes called "share alike", on the basis that the others who wish to benefit from the initial open source software release are required to share their additions on the same basis as the initial release.

The Open Source Institute is recognised as the leading authority on open source licensing. It has a certification program for open source licenses to ensure that these licenses meet the principles of the Open Source Definition — a fundamental statement of open source principles. The GPL and BSD licenses are "OSI Certified" licenses, and hence when LAMS is released under the GPL in February 2005, it will be released using an OSI Certified license.

What is "dual licensing" of open source software?

Dual licensing is a business model available to the original owners of the copyright in an open source software system that is provided under the GPL. It is based on the concept that the original copyright owners of a software system have the right to offer the system under two (or more) different licenses if they choose. This right is a byproduct of common law relating to copyright and licensing. NB: Dual licensing is only available to the original copyright holders of software code — you cannot offer dual license to someone else's open source software.

This becomes relevant where, for example, a third party commercial software company wishes to integrate a GPL software system into a software product that they distribute. Under the requirements of the GPL, the third party commercial software company would be required to release their own commercial product as open source software under the GPL. While in some cases the commercial company may be prepared to do this, in many cases this may be against their commercialisation plans for their own software.

In this case, the third party commercial company could approach the copyright holders of the open source software and request an alternative license to the GPL. The open source copyright holders may then choose to provide a license other than the GPL to the commercial company, and this alternative license may not require the commercial company to make their own product available under the GPL if it is integrated with the open source software and distributed. In exchange for this alternative license, the open source copyright holders may choose to include additional license requirements, such as a requirement that the commercial company pay a license fee for gaining access to the software under the alternative license.

The dual licensing model is becoming one of the standard business models for open source software that uses the GPL. Companies such as MySQL (the world's leading open source database provider), TrollTech and SleepyCat use dual licensing. LAMS has adopted this model to achieve the twin goals of providing commercial providers with an option to take advantage of LAMS without requiring them to make their own software available under the GPL; and providing a potential revenue stream to assist with the ongoing development of the LAMS software.

The ultimate purpose of the use of dual licensing by LAMS is to help create a sustainable long term model for LAMS based on its adoption by both open source and commercial software providers, and the use of fees from non-GPL licenses to continue to develop the system. If you are a commercial software vendor and are interested in a non-GPL LAMS license, please contact info@lamsinternational.com.

What is IMS Learning Design V1.0 Level A?

IMS Learning Design (IMS LD) is a specification developed by the e-learning specification development group IMS Global Learning Consortium. IMS LD is an XML-based description of requirements for e-learning based on the conceptual model of "people doing activities with resources". It is different to other e-learning specifications/standards in that it supports "multi-learner" activities and environments, not just single-learner content. IMS LD was released in its first version in early 2003 (V1.0), and there have been no revisions to the specification to date (and there is no formal revision work currently underway. The specification is complex, and includes three levels of potential implementation (Level A, B and C).

The development of LAMS was based on the conceptual model of Learning Design, and on parts of the IMS LD specification. However, LAMS encountered a range of practical problems with the specification during implementation, so it was not possible to implement the specification in full in the original LAMS development. For this reason, LAMS is often referred to as being IMS LD "inspired" rather than a reference implementation.

LAMS has committed to working on evolving the specification to help address the problems encountered in implementation (although this work is yet to begin within IMS). It is hoped that as the specification evolves to address problems identified in implementation, LAMS will be able to conform to the revised specification. In the interim, LAMS has committed to building an import and export feature for LAMS by July 2005 based on the Level A requirements of IMS LD V1.0 to assist with interoperability.

What kind of services does LAMS International offer?

Services currently on offer include:
- Training (face to face and online) in the use of the LAMS software and in pedagogical issues in implementing LAMS
- Technical support services (available in 20 hour allocations, provided by email or, in certain contexts, by phone)
- Software updates/upgrades — provision of pre-compiled and configured versions of the software, together with bug fixes, patches, new releases, etc as they become available
- Hosting services
- Software development — for custom feature development or other software development tasks. NB: Any new features developed under the GPL are released to all users

For further details about LAMS support services, contact info@lamsinternational.com.

Is LAMS seeking funding for further development?

Yes. The various service offerings of LAMS International are designed to provide useful support services to individual educational organisations at a modest cost while at the same time helping to provide funding for further development of the LAMS software. If you are an individual educational organisation who would like to support LAMS, we encourage you to join one of our trial/support programs to assist you with implementing LAMS, while at the same time helping us to continue its development. For further details of this option, contact info@lamsinternational.com.

For larger organisations with a broad mission to support education, such as government education departments, charitable foundations, etc, LAMS is seeking assistance with core R&D funding. As giving way software for free is an expensive business, LAMS relies on support from organisations that have significant funding at their disposal to support the transformation of education. While the LAMS business model has been built to grow into a self-sustaining structure in the long term, further funding is important in the first three years to ensure LAMS achieves all of its potential benefits. For further details of this option, contact Professor James Dalziel at james@lamsfoundation.com.

For commercial organisations who wish to benefit from including LAMS in their commercial offerings, LAMS provides opportunities to contribute funding towards further development through options such as non-GPL licensing, and certification of hardware and services offerings that incorporate LAMS. For further details of this option, contact contact info@lamsinternational.com.

Who owns new intellectual property created for LAMS?

Core LAMS development by MELCOE or LAMS International automatically vests in the LAMS Foundation, ensuring that ownership of all core intellectual property for LAMS is held by a single, not-for-profit entity dedicated to this purpose. LAMS Foundation then releases the software as open source software under the GPL. Where MELCOE or LAMS International create new intellectual property for LAMS as part of projects (eg, government funded R&D projects), any outcomes of this development vest in LAMS Foundation to be released as open source software.

Once LAMS is released as open source software, any developer is free to add to the LAMS source code, provided that they abide by the conditions of the GPL. Ownership of any new additions to the software remains with the developer. However, any developer (or organisation) may choose to assign the additions back to the LAMS Foundation if they would rather it be managed as part of the central LAMS codebase.

Any "Learning Activity Sequences" created using the LAMS software (using the authoring environment) are owned by the author. Where authors create good examples of Learning Activity Sequences that they may choose to share with others, LAMS will encourage the use of Creative Commons licensing for these sequences (further details to come).