

**Petition to the ICT-Platform of the Faculty of
Economics of the Universiteit Maastricht
Call for keeping Scientific Workplace in the
UM software portfolio**

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27th June 2001



Dear members of the ICT-Platform,

we have gotten wind of the idea to discontinue the current license for the use of Scientific Workplace. We are very troubled by this consideration, since we all have invested in understanding and mastering SWP-features, and we all use the program to our great satisfaction, either as such or in combination with its mother tongue \TeX . Also, we are quite surprised, as it is a fact that Scientific Workplace is commonly used in the scientific community in increasing numbers around the world.

Scientific Workplace, that is offered by McKichan Software Inc., is a user-friendly shell that collects a number of features in one program. It offers handy and easy access to \LaTeX -libraries, without the need to master the detailed programming fostered by real \LaTeX -cracks. The crucial pro of this setup is that one can work on a text that is friendly for the eye in a close to what-you-see-is-what-you-get format, yet use \LaTeX commands in little \LaTeX -fields if one so desires—for example, for very specific little lay-out type of things. It thus offers efficient access to the world wide, ever improving standard of \LaTeX .

Apart from the \LaTeX -shell, Scientific Workplace integrates Maple, a calculus program of the quality level of Mathematica. Moreover, it offers great graphical features, particularly in the latest version 3.5.

We understand that the ICT-platform faces a tight budget. SWP35 weighs heavily, as it is relatively expensive. Currently, the faculty has a license for 10 users for the SWP35 version, for which it has paid around Fl.14.000 (purchase, no further expenses, future upgrades at 35% of this price). Per head, this is a lot of money indeed. Many more faculty members and students, however, use the older SWP30 for which the faculty has a campus license. This version is, however, expected to expire soon, or will at least no longer be supported. Since the recent purchase of the upgrade SWP35 many people wanted to switch, but the 10 licenses have all been handed out. In all, the demand for SWP35 is sufficiently high to justify a campus license. This reduces the price per head drastically. Moreover, SWP35 is likely to last for at least 5 years, which again makes the purchase price acceptable.

For every rational choice—and we expect this to be one—optimal is what best combines preferences and budget restriction. To help you getting insight in

the preferences of the users of Scientific Workplace, we happily list the following 10 arguments in favor of keeping Scientific Workplace (specifically the 3.5 upgrade) in the faculty software portfolio.

1. SWP is a very convenient and reliable editor, particularly when formulas and graphs (either representing data or illustrations of theory) are to be integrated in the text. No other text editor can do this in any way that even approaches SWP's. SWP is very easy to learn, yet provides access to the world of possibilities of \LaTeX . SWP offers what-you-see-is-what-you-get. Moreover, SWP is well supported by the producer, which is not the case with the many other freeware and shareware shells around \TeX and \LaTeX .

Compared to Word 2000—probably considered by the platform as an alternative—it stands out without question in convenience, stability, possibilities for structuring large documents, such as theses, counters, reference possibilities, etc.. The reason why Word crashes with documents that hold over 20 equations (a small number) is, according to Vincent Feltkamp, that it makes a temp-file per formula. With too many of those, the program crashes frequently. (See, for example, the three sample pages attached, one in Word, and two from our respective theses in SWP/ \LaTeX).

2. SWP offers Maple for slight-of-hand calculations, which is very convenient. "There is nothing like Maple in the others." (Thomas Ziesemer)
3. SWP's compatibility with \LaTeX brings many benefits such as extra freeware and shareware. \TeX files can be read on many platforms. They are very small and portable, even when you include graphs (a whole thesis of 200 pages fits on one floppy disk), and do not suffer from compatibility problems between different versions of the compiler—for which Word is notorious. Moreover, \TeX documents are virus-proof as it has no such awkward things as macros. SWP/ \LaTeX runs on various platforms such as Linux and Unix. It offers clean HTML and PDF conversion, and runs smoothly on relatively old-fashioned hardware (Bjørn Volkerink once had it running fine on a 286 machine).

4. SWP saves a lot of time in the editing process. Bas Straathof, who has experience with MathType, says it is no alternative. “Although MathType tries hard to ease the pain of entering formulas in Word, it is still an add-in. This means that entering even one mathematical symbol requires a switch to another program and back, which involves mouse-clicks and waiting. (...) SWP is the only accessible interface to \LaTeX I know of.”
5. SWP is so widely used, it has become the standard for co-authors to exchange files with world wide. “Ik gebruik SWP (liefst de meest recente editie) vooral om te kunnen communiceren met mijn co-auteurs” (Jean-Jacques Herings).
6. For the same reason, there is very wide support to be found for SWP problems, either in newsgroups on the internet, or simply by calling your colleague up- or downstairs or at another university.
7. Also for this reason, many of the serious academic journals strictly prefer, or even require, manuscripts to be send in .TEX or .DVI format. Publishers such as Elsevier (North-Holland), Kluwer and Springer, offer \LaTeX /SWP templates to submit manuscripts in.
8. Offering PhD-theses in \LaTeX reduces the costs of editing and hence makes publication less time consuming and less expensive (Jaap Bos).
9. Even when this is not required, SWP produced documents have an outstanding professional appearance compared to the amateur look of Word 2000 or comparable programs. This professional appearance helps substantially in the refereeing process (Robin Cowan).
10. SWP is offered by faculties world wide. Consequently, it is expected by applicants that we have it too. Not having SWP as a faculty would greatly reduce the attractiveness of UM as an institution for top people. It would be close to not giving them a computer at all!

For even more arguments, see <http://ricardo.ecn.wfu.edu/~cottrell/wp.html> (provided by Ronald Peeters).

In addition, we believe it is a good idea to further encourage students to use the program for writing their theses, for example through offering a course or skills training in \TeX /SWP. That way, “hoef ik de door Word verknoeiide maaksels niet meer te lezen,” says Ralph Olthoff. “Knowing is loving,” according to Vincent Feltkamp.

Finally, we provide you with some quotes from the spontaneous reactions to the news of this unfortunate plan of the ICT platform.

Robin Cowan (MERIT/AE) thinks that we need to keep this program “without question.” He says “If we want to be taken seriously as an academic/scientific institution, we have to be able to produce documents that are treated as professionally done by other academic scientists.”

Denis de Crombrughe (KE) uses the program “daily, at the office and at home.”

Jean-Jacques Herings (AE) says: “Het is erg belangrijk dat de faculteit dit programma ook in de toekomst blijft ondersteunen.”

Hans Peters (KE): “[Ik] denk dat het schrappen van SWP het slechtste is wat de Faculteit kan doen. Je maakt je daar als wetenschappelijke instelling volslagen belachelijk mee! Mensen die later zijn gaan “ \TeX en” doen dat allemaal via SWP (bijvoorbeeld alle KE-secretarissen), dus dat programma moet absoluut gehandhaafd blijven. Het bedrag van 10.000 lijkt me overigens voor onze faculteit nog steeds “peanuts”.”

Stefan Straetmans (A&F) writes: “Het lijkt me ... buitengewoon vervelend wat ze willen doen.”

Sybrand Schim van der Loeff (KE) says: “Ik begrijp het niet. Bij KE is afgesproken dat SWP/(La) \TeX als wordprocessor zou worden gebruikt en dat we Word alleen voor de communicatie met de faculteit zouden handhaven”

Rudolf Muller (KE/Infonomics) says: “[O]ne should not reduce the efficiency of 10 colleagues just to save Fl.10.000. The argument that new staff is expecting it is also very important.”

Karin van den Boorn (KE) says: “For typing a paper or an exam the program is much more “gebruikersvriendelijk” than the scientific part of Word. SW-place makes work a lot easier. (...) If [people] once know how easy it is to use SW-place it will save them a lot of time. (...) I really hope that there will not be decided to stop the current license.”

Christiane Schwierien (AE) replies to the question what arguments are in favor of SWP: “... the formula editor of Word 2000? ... arguments here are so obvious—I mean, it’s WORD!?!?!”

Jaap Bos (AE) states: “If we don’t have it, collaborating with others becomes very difficult.”

Ronald Peeters (AE) says: “Who needs something else. There is no better computer typesetting program than L^AT_EX/SWP. So it would be better to give up the Word 2000 license to support L^AT_EX/SWP.”

We hope we have given sufficient insight into the strict preferences that exist in our faculty. We are all longing for a wider license for SWP35. We certainly want to encourage the platform to look for other ways to reduce costs on the purchase of SWP35. However, the Fl.33.000 for the purchase of a campus license (with a Fl.6600 yearly service contract) we believe is more than justified. In fact, given that Fl.14.000 has already been paid for the 10 licenses, the extra costs are only Fl.19.000. These could perhaps be shared with other faculties of the UM, since it concerns a campus license. Furthermore, should the faculty decide to drop SWP, it should reckon with switching costs in training and conversion to any of the imperfect alternatives. Moreover, it would severely hinder academic production. There is no question that this is a crucial piece of software that, if removed from the UM software portfolio, would jettison us back into the Word-, eh sorry, Stone-age.

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