



Research software licensing scenarios

From the STEP-UP event *Recognising research software: licensing, credit, and quality* on Thursday 4 Sep 2025 at Imperial College London.

Scenario 1: The unlicensed script

A PhD student uploads a Python script to GitHub to accompany a paper but doesn't include a licence. Another researcher wants to reuse the code but isn't sure if it's legally allowed.

Discussion prompts:

- What are the risks of leaving the code unlicensed?
- What licence might be appropriate for this kind of output?
- How can the student make the software citable and reusable?

Scenario 2: Institutional repository submission

A researcher wants to deposit their software in the university repository, but the library requires a licence to be specified. They're unsure which licence best supports reuse, visibility and citation.

Discussion prompts:

- What factors should guide the choice of licence for repository submission?
- How does licensing affect discoverability and reuse?
- What support can the library offer in making this decision?

Scenario 3: Funder requirements

A UKRI-funded project must make its software outputs openly available, but the team is unsure which licence meets the funder's expectations. They're also concerned about protecting their work from commercial exploitation.

Discussion prompts:

- What licences meet UKRI's open access requirements?
- How can licensing balance openness with protection?
- What happens if the licence is too restrictive or too permissive?



Scenario 4: Third-party dependencies

A researcher builds a tool using libraries under MIT, GPL and Apache licences, and wants to release their tool openly. They're unsure how the mix of licences affects what they can legally choose.

Discussion prompts:

- How do third-party licences influence your own licensing options?
- Can you use a permissive licence if one dependency is under GPL?
- What documentation should be included to clarify licensing?

Relevant links

- [Licensing your data](#) (Imperial Research Data Management team)
- [Preferred open source software licences for Imperial](#) (Imperial Enterprise)

Scenario 5: Redeveloping previously licensed software

A previous PhD student in the group released software under an open-source licence. Now the PI wants to redevelop and commercialise it, but isn't sure if that's legally allowed.

Discussion prompts:

- Can you commercialise software that was previously released under an open-source licence?
- What are the legal and ethical considerations?
- If commercialisation isn't possible, what alternatives exist?

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