

Key Themes from ICANN84 Universal Acceptance Policy Discussions

Analysis of scribe notes and working group flowchart

The Big Picture: What's This Really About?

The discussions at ICANN84 reveal a fascinating challenge: how do you get governments to actually make the internet work for everyone, regardless of what language they speak or what script they use? The group wrestling with this question came up with some compelling answers—but also surfaced some thorny debates.

Theme 1: Government as the Driver (Not Just a Participant)

The Core Argument: Governments need to lead by example, not just talk about inclusion.

The group agreed that governments should **mandate** the use of Internationalized Domain Names (IDNs) and email addresses internally. Think about it—if a Chinese government official can only be reached via an English-script email address, what message does that send to citizens who primarily use Chinese characters?

The reasoning here is simple but powerful: When procurement policies require that all government software must be Universal Acceptance (UA) compliant, it creates immediate market demand. Software vendors will adapt because they want those government contracts. This is policy leverage at its most practical.

The handwritten notes emphasize this needs to happen at the country level as a first level policy—meaning this cannot just be a suggestion. It needs teeth.

Theme 2: The Three Pillars (And Why They All Matter Equally)

The Framework: Awareness → Capacity Building → Technical Implementation

Here's where the discussion got really interesting. The group realized you can't just mandate technical compliance and expect it to work. You need all three pillars working together:

Awareness

People genuinely don't understand what Universal Acceptance is. As one participant noted, you need to help frame the government to develop the policy. If policymakers don't grasp why this matters, the policy will be weak or poorly enforced.

Capacity Building

This is where theory meets reality. **A concrete example:** Let's say Guatemala wants to ensure all government websites support Spanish domain names with proper accent marks (like ñ in español). The government can't just decree this—they need to:

- Train web developers on how to implement EAI (Email Address Internationalization)
- Run workshops for IT procurement officers so they know what questions to ask vendors
- Create testing labs where agencies can verify their systems are actually UA compliant before deployment

As the notes emphasize: Unless you build capacity, you cannot build implementation. The three aspects are dependent on each other.

Technical Implementation

The actual doing—updating systems, changing procurement language, ensuring WHOIS databases accept all character sets.

Why this framework matters: The group observed that China's five-year action plan succeeded because it addressed all three pillars simultaneously. Pure technical mandates without awareness and capacity building tend to fail.

Theme 3: The Language Scope Debate

The Tension: Should countries only support their official languages, or should systems be universally accepting?

This debate ran through both discussion rounds. The question kept coming up: If Australia's primary language is English (ASCII script), should the government require systems to accept Chinese email addresses?

Two competing perspectives emerged:

Position A (Restrictive): Countries should focus on their official local languages. Guatemala should prioritize Spanish characters but not necessarily Mandarin. This makes implementation more manageable and focused.

Position B (Universalist): Any character set should be allowed—the restriction should only apply to preventing mixed scripts in a single domain (to avoid homograph attacks). Why? Because:

- Minority populations exist everywhere
- In Australia, if Chinese residents use Chinese email addresses, that creates incentive for government systems to support them
- True Universal Acceptance means accepting everything, not just what's convenient

The Pragmatic Middle Ground: The group seemed to settle on the idea that while official languages should be prioritized, systems should still be technically UA compliant (able to handle any script), even if promotion focuses on local languages.

Theme 4: ccTLDs as Technical Enablers (Not Policy Dictators)

The Role Definition: Country-code Top-Level Domains (ccTLDs) should provide technical support and capacity building, but not receive strict orders from government.

This theme reflects a delicate balance. As noted in the flowchart: ccTLD should support the IDN and UA technical building.

Why this matters: ccTLD operators have the technical expertise governments often lack. They can:

- Help draft technically sound policy language
- Provide training and capacity building
- Offer testing environments
- Share lessons learned from other countries

But they don't want governments micromanaging technical decisions. The relationship should be collaborative, not top-down.

China example: The Chinese government issued high-level policy promoting Chinese domain names, which then trickles down to a 5-year action plan. The technical operators (like CNNIC) then figured out implementation details. That division of labor worked.

Theme 5: Clear Standards & Definitions (The UNESCO Question)

The Problem: People do not understand what UA is.

Multiple participants emphasized the need for **clear technical definitions and standards**. The handwritten notes show this concern prominently: Technical standards plus alignment clear definition, Definition of UA, UNESCO to be used?

The Reasoning: If every country defines Universal Acceptance differently, you don't actually get universal acceptance. You get a fragmented internet.

The Proposal: Develop clear definitions that could be promoted through international organizations like UNESCO. This would give governments:

- A reference point for policy language
- Technical specifications for procurement requirements
- A way to ensure their national policy aligns with global standards

This isn't just bureaucratic box-checking—it's about ensuring that an email address that works in one country doesn't fail when sent to another country.

Theme 6: The Policy Home Concept

The Insight: A policy without an institutional owner dies quietly.

This practical observation came through strongly in Round 2: Once you have a policy, you need to have a body in the government that sees the policy through. The policy needs to have a home.

What this means in practice:

- One government agency (often a digital ministry or telecommunications regulator) gets tasked with monitoring progress
- They need a reasonably well-defined mechanism and set of indicators to measure compliance
- Progress needs to be tracked with actual data, not just good intentions

The handwritten notes emphasize: Set of indicators - data - to monitor progress and time frame.

Why this matters: Without someone specifically responsible, policy compliance becomes everyone's job, which means it becomes no one's job. Deadlines slip. Standards get watered down. The policy becomes performative rather than functional.

Theme 7: Procurement as the Leverage Point

The Strategy: Make UA compliance a mandatory requirement for government software procurement.

This theme appears in both rounds and the flowchart because it's the most direct policy lever available.

The Logic:

- Governments are huge software buyers
- Vendors want those contracts
- If bids require UA compliance, vendors will deliver UA compliance
- Once vendors build it for government, they'll offer it commercially

As the notes state: Any application software procedures through tender must be UA compliant.

This isn't just wishful thinking—it's how accessibility standards gradually improved in many countries. Government procurement requirements drove private sector adoption.

Theme 8: Timelines & Urgency

The Emphasis: Clear Timeframe and deadline: by when compliance should be in place.

The group recognized that policies without deadlines tend to languish. The handwritten notes stress specific time frame as essential for success.

The Debate: How fast should this go?

On one hand, technical implementation takes time—systems need updating, people need training, vendors need to adapt. On the other hand, the longer you wait, the more entrenched the ASCII-only systems become.

The China example again: Their five-year action plan provided a realistic but firm timeline. That seems to be the model—not so aggressive that it's impossible, but not so relaxed that there's no urgency.

Theme 9: Beyond Government (But Starting With Government)

The Broader Vision: Needs to go across all stakeholders. Not just government.

While government action is the catalyst, true Universal Acceptance requires:

- Private sector adoption
- Civil society awareness
- Technical community support
- Business implementation

The Reasoning: If only government websites support your language's domain names, that's not universal acceptance—that's limited acceptance. The goal is to reach the point where using your native script online is as natural as using English ASCII is today.

Government action creates the foundation, but market forces and social adoption need to take it from there.

The Arguments Presented: A Summary

For Strong Government Mandates:

- Creates immediate market demand through procurement
- Leads by example and signals commitment
- Provides clear legal framework for compliance
- Accelerates adoption that might otherwise take decades

For Flexibility and Local Adaptation:

- Different countries have different linguistic realities
- Technical implementation capacity varies
- ccTLDs need autonomy to serve their communities effectively
- One-size-fits-all approaches often fail

For International Coordination:

- Prevents fragmentation of technical standards
- Shares best practices across countries
- Leverages organizations like UNESCO for credibility
- Ensures email addresses work globally, not just locally

For the Three-Pillar Approach:

- Technical mandates without awareness fail
- Awareness without capacity building creates frustration
- Capacity building without implementation is wasted effort
- All three must work together

Bottom Line

These discussions reveal a maturing understanding of how to actually achieve Universal Acceptance. It's not just a technical problem—it's a policy challenge that requires government leadership, clear standards, capacity building, international coordination, and practical timelines.

The most compelling argument throughout? **Lead by example, build capacity systematically, and make UA compliance a requirement for government procurement.** That combination of soft power (example-setting) and hard power (procurement requirements) creates the conditions for real change.

But success requires keeping all three pillars strong, giving the policy an institutional home, and recognizing that while governments can mandate compliance, they need technical partners (like ccTLDs) to make it actually work.