

Statement of Principles on Uniform Websites and Related Policy Matters

Recently, the Federal Executive Council (FEC) approved the implementation of “a harmonized ICT initiatives for tertiary institutions in the country”. As part of these initiatives, the Federal Government was reported to have signed an agreement on behalf of Federal Tertiary Schools in the country to rollout world-class ICT centers using “tested and functional models” and that the centers will be funded with loans to the respective Universities and guaranteed by the Federal Government.

It is equally in the news that yet another set of consultants have been commissioned by Government to build contents/ course materials for an Interactive Learning Network Project for some of our institutions and secondary schools.

Also recently, the Federal Executive Council (FEC) approved the development of **uniform websites for all tertiary institutions by a consultant**. Already, Institutions have been asked to provide specific information in the format required to have their sites developed for them.

Government, as a regulator (and a proprietor/ financier in some cases) of education, of course has a right and responsibility to:

- a) request from any and all universities, higher education institutions, and research & education institutions, for information at any time and in whatever format(s) it is required.
- b) in consultation with the institutions, make or set and review systemic (and therefore general) policies and minimum standards for education, and accredit those standards.
- c) Provision the institutions with the resources and right policy environment required by these foci of development to achieve the mission of developing human resources and conducting research and development at the highest level, as well as providing community services.

However, as a Statement of Principle, regardless of whether or not our Higher Education Institutions are financing such projects, given our mandated missions, it seems inappropriate for Government to:

- 1) Ask or demand that all institutions (whether or not we are autonomous) should have exactly the same content, look and feel, as this would clearly kill institutional creativity, innovation and the spirit of competition. In this connection it is noted that while higher education institutions nurture and stimulate creativity, innovation and competition, Government encourages such activities through the webometric ranking of institutions, accreditation and other policies. Furthermore, it is difficult to see the

benefit that uniform websites can provide, and there is a major question mark about how such websites will be sustained and managed.

- 2) Commission another organization (and a for-profit firm at that) to provide it with the same information that is after all, generated by the institutions and provided by the institutions to Government and in the format required by Government. There would clearly be no value to be added by the contractor, especially as institutional information changes constantly and frequently, and only the institution can provide updates.

Universities and other Research & Education Institutions should have the internal resources to be able to develop their own web presence and services. Where such skilled resources are not in place, then it should be the responsibility of each individual university to partner with a private sector company to achieve this. The major challenge of a university website is not necessarily developing it, but managing and updating the content so that it remains useful beyond the date of commissioning. This aspect of web maintenance has to be the sole responsibility of the institution and it is unrealistic for this to be managed by a single 'consultancy' dealing with all institutions.

- 3) Commission a private commercial firm to teach our students exactly the same content and basic skills, regardless of institutional status, when our target should be to build enough capacity to teach our students as well as provide advanced training and conduct research for private firms. In this connection, it is also unfair to ask the institutions to provide the buildings and their students to pay, especially:
 - a) when the institutions themselves are officially banned from charging tuition fees, and
 - b) have not been provided with funds to teach the subject or undertake these activities.
- 4) Ask autonomous institutions to all sign an agreement that gives exclusive rights for five years to a single commercial firm/ consultant to provide services and products we should be providing to others, especially in a rapidly changing area of technology.

This amounts to saying that within that time frame of five years, there will be no advancements recorded; that our institutions will remain passive consumers; and that our academic and technical staff cannot learn to provide those services- assuming that our staff cannot provide them at the present moment. In this connection, institutions that need partnerships of one type or another already have (or are developing) partnerships with private firms of their own choice. This exclusivity will therefore:

- a) kill more public-private partnerships than it will create
- b) deprive institutions of rights of choice, assessment or determination of the contracts, and
- c) discourage inter-institutional collaboration.

In conclusion,

- 1) Institutional websites should be applications that have web based front ends that integrate into an institution's back-end databases for purposes of resource planning, such as: student administration (admissions, course registration and result checking etc.); other general administration (campus directories, e-mail communication and instant messaging, etc); course administration and other academic services; etc. A generic uniform website cannot provide any of this and would be a step backwards as some of the universities have already made considerable progress towards producing the desired web services.
- 2) Many universities and other educational institutions in Nigeria already have their own websites and strategic plans for leveraging the internet to achieve many of their ICT goals, including: e-learning, distance learning, online payments, and student/teacher collaboration initiatives, among many others.
- 3) For those institutions that have not yet developed their own websites, then an opportunity for capacity building and inter-institutional collaboration arises. Rather than some external consultant building the site for them, there needs to be some collaboration between the institutions and with private partners of their choice to work together on development.
- 4) Advances in Internet and web technology are increasingly minimizing the challenges of establishing a web presence. For example, there are content management system frameworks readily available that make building websites very simple. Managing web content is now more of a challenge than building a website and these types of initiatives (though well intended) will not really provide any significant contribution and will retard institutional development if approached in this manner.

If universities and other Research & Education Institutions are (or appear to be) deficient compared to private firms at the moment, it is because our institutions:

- a) do not have the same level of resources and facilitation available to private firms;
and
- b) are unable to participate in the same National and International workshops, conferences and training programs that private sector firms are able to participate in, as and when due, in this very rapidly advancing area of technology.

We therefore urge Federal Government to reconsider these matters as a matter of principle, to reflect our institutional mission objectives and roles as centres for National development.