

Lessons from VUSSC: The Making of a “Virtual University”



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Written By Paul West and Kris Roberts, Commonwealth of Learning

1. What is VUSSC

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) is a global educational consortium initiated by and built at the request of Commonwealth Ministers of Education with a focus on small countries.

VUSSC is committed to the building of human capacity in the Small States of the Commonwealth. The collaborative efforts of educators from participating countries results in the development of open content resources for education, training and capacity building, and the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) to broaden access to education.

VUSSC is a virtual consortium that aims to:

- **Build professional capacity** of educators and institutions in Small States.
- **Enable learners** to have access to quality education, to take courses from a variety of quality-assured providers and earn accumulated credits towards appropriate credentials.
- **Strengthen small states** through the establishment of the shared ICT learning content and infrastructure to enable the creation of open learning resources.
- **Add value** to both conventional on-campus instruction as well as serving learners where distance education institutions exist, including:
 - Providing leadership in the planning and design of programmes, curricula and courses that are pertinent to the resource development needs of small states.

- Developing capacity in small states in areas of ICTs, the production of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) materials and Open Educational Resources (OERs).
- Development of a **Transnational Framework of Qualifications**.

Through VUSSC, thirty-two countries from across the globe have begun to collaborate to strengthen their education systems.

2. VUSSC History in Brief

2.1 Inception: 2000 to 2003

Commonwealth Education Ministers conceived the idea of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) at their meeting in Halifax, Canada, in 2000.

Following the Halifax meeting, COL chaired a Technical Advisory Group (TAC) which helped draft the proposal for the VUSSC, outlining key areas that could add value to higher education in small states.

COL's TAC findings included:

- Most countries already have a range of institutions that offer primary to tertiary education and in most cases; they have at least one university.
- Economies of scale negatively affect small countries from operating universities:
 - The practice of sending learners to other countries for tertiary education is costly and has negative side effects such as brain-drain.
 - There are complexities in cooperating with foreign education providers such as accreditation and cost.
 - Some foreign providers have managed to operate under a 'front' provided by the local government, or possibly without proper regulation (COL, 2003).

To avoid of competition with local and national institutions, it was agreed that VUSSC could be neither an institution, nor a consortium of institutions so as not to risk becoming a competitor to any national institution. Rather, VUSSC put emphasis on the capacity building of professional educators who could in turn, impact on educational systems. Through the training workshops, Open Educational Resources (OER) have been created which are available free of charge and in many cases have been incorporated into curricula in participating countries.

VUSSC's core strengths have been identified as:

- Creating a network of professional educators and facilitators who have improved ICT and content development skills. While being planned and managed at a senior level, it is more of a 'bottom-up' rather than a top-down approach by starting with capacity building rather than establishing a head office for an inter-institution consortium.

- Sharing existing course materials & developing new ones.
- Promoting of existing educational programmes which can be co-branded under the VUSSC logo once they have adhered to the requirements of the Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF).

2.2 Implementation: 2004 to Present

By 2004, after Ministers of Education approved the concept plan, COL began working intensively with the small states to implement the plan for VUSSC. By this time, the context for its creation had changed, especially since the ‘dot.com’ bubble had burst which made virtual projects somewhat less attractive in which to invest.

Implementation of training workshops began first, followed by the conceptualization of the Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF). Meetings of Ministry Interlocutors were held every two years after the start of the implementation and a Management Committee is now directing VUSSC's activities, supported by COL's Education Specialist for VUSSC, Mr. John Lesperance. The committee includes representatives from small states in all regions of the Commonwealth.

2.3 Partnerships

The VUSSC has been partnering with a number of organizations and post-secondary institutions at all levels in its development. The number of these organizations and post-secondary institutions has expanded the scope of VUSSC and work to sustain its funding base.

A couple of VUSSC's partner agencies include:

- National Ministries of Education and Tertiary Institutions from 32 countries
- The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC)
- The William & Flora Hewlett Foundation
- The Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- National Qualifications Authorities (NQAs)
- The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)

3. Key Elements of VUSSC

3.1 Courses

“VUSSC's courses” are those programmes of study that offered by nationally recognized institutions, where the programme has satisfied the requirements of the Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF). They may range from full degree programmes to certificate courses and shorter, skills-related post-secondary courses in areas of specific interest to small states.

Topics for professional capacity building include: tourism, business development and entrepreneurship, professional development in education, health, construction, fisheries, life skills, the maritime industry and disaster management.

3.2 Transnational Qualifications Framework

Developing a 30+ country international online course poses challenges of qualifications frameworks and qualifications recognition. VUSSC is developing a Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF) – a widely recognized framework to support the accreditation of VUSSC programmes to help build credibility and facilitate the movement of courses and learners between states. The main components of the VUSSC TQF are:

- Qualifications Levels
- Qualification Types
- Quality Assurance Criteria

The following is a broad “working definition” of a qualifications framework, based on a range of existing definitions:

A qualifications framework is an instrument for the classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning achieved, which aims to integrate and coordinate qualifications subsystems and improve the transparency, access, progression, comparability and quality of qualifications in relation to the labour market and civil society.

Qualification authorities have already been created or are under development in most of the small states. Some are regional bodies that will serve several countries. The TQF does not aim to substitute sectoral, national or regional quality assurance systems, but strives to achieve coherence through being a translation instrument for qualifications.

By specifying the complexity, volume and level of learning expected for each qualification, the TQF will describe the expected outcomes of the qualification in the form of an internationally accepted broad profile of the learner’s competencies. The following qualification types have been agreed by national qualification authorities:

- Certificates (Levels 1 - 4)
- Diplomas (Levels 5 - 8)
- Associate Degree (Level 6)
- Foundation Degree (Level 7)
- Bachelors Degrees (Levels 7 - 8)
- Graduate Certificates (Level 7)

- Graduate Diplomas (Level 7)
- Postgraduate Certificates (Level 8)
- Postgraduate Diplomas (Level 8)
- Masters Degrees (Level 9)
- Doctoral Degrees (Level 10)

A committee of representatives from six small states of the Commonwealth has developed a TQF Implementation Plan that is being forwarded to Ministers of Education in all 32 states for endorsement.

4. Process of Collaborative Knowledge Development

4.1 Why build an educational network between countries?

High quality and relevant educational content is not cheap to produce and the human resources to produce them are not abundant in all countries. In a context of scarce resources, collaboration amongst Ministries, regulating authorities, institutions and educators becomes a requirement to help to resolve some of the challenges that small states face.

4.2 Training Workshops

VUSSC builds human capacity in online materials development among educators in small states of the Commonwealth by hosting intensive training workshops or "boot camps." International training workshops have taken place in six countries to date, with participants from a total of 26 countries. Workshop participants are educational professionals and have had the VUSSC activity included in their annual work plan.

In the VUSSC workshops, educators from small states:

- Learn computer literacy skills including software, education technology and collaboration tools.
- Develop OER learning materials.

The workshops are designed to achieve the following set of outcomes:

1. **Learn to work collaboratively in online environments:** to use a range of technologies in education such as word processor (styles), Wikis and other Web 2.0 skills (online interactive), presentation and receive some orientation to learning Management Systems (such as Moodle or ATutor).
2. **Create a set of "finished" materials:** Using the COL Instructional Design Template and an online project management space called "BaseCamp" course modules have been produced and published on VUSSC/COL's website for anyone to use under a Creative Commons license.

3. **Accredit course materials:** Accreditation is occurring when institutions adopt the materials into their curriculum.

To date, some 200 people have participated in either policy-level meetings or immersion training workshops. Upon return to their home countries, participants continue to collaborate on course materials and share their skills with colleagues.

The seventh VUSSC training workshop is being held in Samoa (Nov-Dec 2009) and is focussing on professional development within the maritime industry.

5. Challenges for VUSSC

5.1 Small Nations

A small nation state generally faces unique difficulties such as:

Natural resources are limited in quantity and variety.

- A small population makes it difficult for a country to have enough skilled and qualified people in all the many occupations and trades that underpin a modern economy.
- The ‘tyranny of transport’ that impedes trade to and from ports in neighbouring countries. Island states face the challenges of distance from markets and the cost of sea and air links.
- Special environmental challenges including vulnerability natural disasters such as hurricanes, tsunamis, floods, and rising sea levels.

5.2 Poverty Alleviation

VUSSC operates in a range of low- to middle-income countries, providing practical skills. Economic and social development depends on the creation, dissemination and application of knowledge by everyone. Open and distance learning course materials developed by VUSSC aims to enrich the curriculum of all schools and universities, thereby enabling students to improve their livelihoods.

5.3 Technology

The goal of establishing a ‘fully online’ network had to be tempered with the reality of a lack of computers, the Internet and sometimes the understanding that access to these could improve teaching and learning.

- **Computers:** Many educators do not have their own computers, nor is an available computer allocated for work at their office. Internet cafés and computer laboratories still remain the primary access point to computers for many people.
- **Bandwidth:** The slow speed of data transfer over the Internet has far-ranging implications for online learning. Many of the participating countries in VUSSC access the internet via satellite making it expensive, slow and may frequently be dysfunctional. With these limitations, it was not

surprising to find that participants of workshops did not have ‘an online culture’ as one would expect in high bandwidth countries. The intensive workshops were designed to expose participants to more online technologies (while working within the constraints of each host country and institution).

5.4 Political Commitment

In smaller states, Ministries of Education sometimes comprise less than six professional staff members. Each of the countries usually has at least one national university.

The first Interlocutors Meeting in 2006 was held in Singapore to develop a high-level strategy to plan the future of the Initiative. Regular meetings have been since been held and the Interlocutors have formed a Management Committee.

The Interlocutors Meeting and subsequent follow up provides a direct communication channel between VUSSC and governments.

5.5 Quality

The issues of quality assurance for distance educators needed to be addressed in a way that would not be an imposition to any participating country. The Transnational Qualifications Framework provides a framework for comparison and support without being prescriptive. A mechanism for peer review will be established when needed. Some of the tools and expertise for this have already been developed in others initiatives.

6. Enabling Technologies

Teaching and learning consist of combinations of different modes of communication and collaboration.

6.1 VUSSC Website

An internet portal has been created for VUSSC. The website is already providing access to an online programme offered by an accredited institution. The URL for the website is www.vussc.info and it is a gateway to information on VUSSC, particularly for member states but to the rest of the world. The website will serve as a portal for the registration of VUSSC courses offered by participating institutions that are accredited by National Qualifications Authorities or other recognized national bodies.

6.2 Print materials

Print materials are still important for learning, and can be developed in face-to-face workshops or by an online group. Once completed, they can be delivered electronically to close to the point of need via the Internet, printed and delivered for classroom use or used after being delivered to the learner online. This blend of technologies makes print materials very versatile. Print materials are available in editable format so that they may be customised for local contexts.

6.3 Instructional Design Template

COL has developed an Instructional Design Template (MS Word 2003, MS Word 2007 and OpenOffice 3 formats) for instructional design that helps learning content developers convert their subject matter expertise into learning materials. It helps authors incorporate ODL instructional design techniques into their learning texts.

Tested in many countries and institutions and with feedback from many instructional designers, the Instructional Design Template is a collaborative effort. Anyone who may feel discouraged from developing ODL learning materials may feel more empowered once the basics of template styles are learned.

6.4 Internet collaboration space

- Forums have been used to pose questions, discuss solutions and plan.
- Private Blogs help develop ideas to support course development.
- Wikis have been used to stream information and build learning materials.

6.5 Software

The software used by educators is of critical importance. Proprietary software (Windows, Word, PowerPoint, Blackboard) tends to be expensive, subject to limited licensing.

“Open source” software can be freely used as an alternative if the cost of licensing is a barrier. These products may be copied, modified and redistributed without restriction. Important open source software for educational collaboration and learning include:

- **Operating systems:** Linux, Google Chrome (future)
- **Internet browsers:** Google Chrome, Firefox
- **Word processing:** Writer
- **Presentations:** Impress
- **Education Management:** Moodle, ATutor
- **Communication:** Eudora

6.6 Creative Commons Copyright

The open transfer of learning materials is encouraged through the use of Creative Commons licenses. Wherever possible, course content is shared under a Creative Commons by attribution, share-and-share-alike (CC-BY, CC-BY-SA or CC-BY-SA-NC) licence.

7. Monitoring and Evaluation

The VUSSC Monitoring and Evaluation Report was conducted by the Research Unit of Simon Fraser University, and updated in September 2008. The report includes recorded interviews with VUSSC

Interlocutors held during the Interlocutors' meeting and the Pan Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning held in London in July 2008.

The following excerpts indicate the responses from Interlocutors Meeting representing national Ministries of Education (Dunlop C., 2008):

"I see this initiative as one of the best things that has happened in the area of tertiary education in the Commonwealth in a very, very long time. It is opening up opportunities for a lot of people to participate who have not participated before. What VUSSC is doing is very, very important for us in terms of delivering education to the whole Bahamas. So I think it's a wonderful idea. I think it's a wonderful concept." (The Bahamas)

"The concept of developing a virtual university for the benefit of small island states is very crucial to Tuvalu. Particularly because it is quite costly for us to go to other universities out of Tuvalu. Our Minister of Finance is very cautious dealing with students sent overseas in terms of budgetary allocations." (Tuvalu)

"Ministers especially praised the work of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), and encouraged its expansion in terms of capacity-building in the use of ICTs in education, and the development and delivery of courses, with particular emphasis on mechanisms for quality assurance." (Communiqué issued by the 17th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, July 2009)

"They expressed particular appreciation for the work of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth." (Communiqué issued by the Heads of Commonwealth Governments, November 2009)

Budget and Funding

The rapid implementation of VUSSC encouraged the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to provide COL with a grant which helped fund the initial stages of the VUSSC. Early successes also encouraged the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC) to provide VUSSC with funding over a period of four years.

8. Additional Resources & Links

For more information, please see:

VUSSC Homepage:

<http://www.vussc.info/>

Commonwealth of Learning - VUSSC Site:

<http://www.col.org/progServ/programmes/Pages/VUSSC.aspx>

VUSSC Course Materials:

http://www.vussc.info/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=47&Itemid=27

Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF):

http://www.vussc.info/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=123&Itemid=2

Instructional Content Design:
www.col.org/traininghandbooks