

# *The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth: A collaborative effort of the Small States*

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## **Introduction**

It seems particularly appropriate to present the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, which is a collaborative effort of many Small States at this Global Forum of the Observatory for Borderless Higher Education. I say that for three reasons.

First, with 32 states involved, the VUSSC may be the borderless teaching programme with the most countries participating.

Second, these states are distributed all over the world – in the Caribbean, the Pacific, the Indian Ocean and Africa – making it a global venture.

Third, unlike much cross-border education, which often has a neo-colonialist tinge, with one country exporting and others importing, this is a genuinely multi-lateral venture with no lead country. That is one reason for its success and also explains why it is a pioneer in several ways.

The name is a misnomer. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is not a new degree-awarding institution. It is a mechanism for the Small States of the Commonwealth to collaborate and strengthen the capacity of their national educational institutions by developing course materials together. However, since the name was chosen by the Commonwealth Ministers of Education it is here to stay.

I make this presentation on behalf of my colleagues John Lesperance and Paul West, from Seychelles and South Africa respectively, who are two of the key architects of this interesting example of borderless tertiary education.

## Historical Background

### *The concept*

Let me start with the historical background. The idea of the VUSSC was launched when Commonwealth Ministers of Education held their triennial meeting in Canada in 2000.

That Millennium year, 2000, saw a strong focus on educational development. The World Forum on Education for All met in Dakar and set six targets for education and training. Later that year the United Nations articulated eight Millennium Development Goals that incorporated two of the Dakar Goals. Ministers of Education felt under pressure to develop their education systems.

That was also the year of the dotcom frenzy. Developed countries became infatuated with the Internet as it began transforming communication between people and creating new methods of doing business. The Internet clearly also had implications for education and vendors and technophiles were quick to claim that online was the future and older educational methods would soon be consigned to the dustbin of history.

These developments created a tantalising dilemma for the Commonwealth Education Ministers when they met at the end of 2000. The Dakar Goals and the Millennium Declaration enjoined them to increase access to education at all levels. New information and communication technologies threatened to make traditional approaches to teaching and learning obsolete but also promised novel ways of expand education.

Ministers from the Small States faced a special dilemma because few of them believed that their countries had the critical mass of expertise or ICT infrastructure to go it alone in the new eWorld. Yet they did not want to be tributary, as in the past, to technologies, systems and materials developed by larger states.

The Ministers thought that by working together as Small States they could nurture an indigenous capacity for online learning that would enable them to harness these new developments for the benefit of their peoples. The mechanism would be what they called the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

COL helped them develop a proposal, which a sub-group of Ministers reviewed at a meeting in Seychelles in 2003. Their plan for the VUSSC was approved later in the year by the next triennial Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in Edinburgh and they asked COL to continue to help them.

### *Plan meets reality*

However, by 2004, when implementation of the VUSSC began, the world had changed.

First, eLearning was clearly not going to consign other forms of education and training to the dustbin of history. Some of the initial applications of eLearning had given disappointing results and the hangover from the dotcom frenzy had matured and chastened people. But although online learning was moving into education by seepage rather than tsunami and it clearly had great potential.

Second, the Ministers' planning had assumed funding to establish the VUSSC as a new Commonwealth body with its own organisational structure and headquarters. However, donors said that they were not interested in funding a new intergovernmental agency or multi-national university consortium, although they liked the idea of strengthening education and training through existing national institutions, particularly if linked to development objectives.

Third, ICT had evolved considerably since 2000. MIT's OpenCourseware project had given momentum to the concept of Open Educational Resources (OERs). Multi-media and ICT were merging into a rich environment that encouraged greater collaboration through what we now call Web 2.0. This had encouraged COL to launch WikiEducator, a space for online contribution, in 2006.

Reacting to these changes COL began building VUSSC from the bottom up by focusing on capacity building in the Small States. The focus switched from creating something new to building upon the institutional capacities that already existed. The aims were to build the capacity of existing institutions by collaboratively developing teaching and learning materials, to support the creation of accreditation mechanisms and to facilitate the exchange of educational programmes among Small States and others.

The challenge facing COL and the Small States was that they had no model to guide them. Any model had to be flexible and take account of extensive consultations with government policymakers and institutional staff.

For starters COL canvassed ministers of education on two key issues. Did their country want to continue with the project? Two-thirds said they did.

What were the priority educational and training objectives they hoped to achieve? Their responses generated a list that emphasised shorter skills-related post-secondary courses. Areas identified were as hospitality and tourism management, small business development and entrepreneurship, professional development for the education and health sectors, life skills, construction management, fisheries management, and disaster management.

COL was asked to facilitate training in the joint development of course materials that could be used by national institutions in a range of settings – face-to-face and distance. Another goal was to strengthen the sense of membership and ownership of the VUSSC consortium itself. In the light of these aims training in the development of open educational resources (OERs) was the first VUSSC activity.

## Implementation

### *Course Development Workshops (Boot Camps)*

COL's tactic was to get Small States to volunteer to hold face-to-face course development and training workshops, attended by academics from all interested countries. Academics were trained in writing distance learning materials using online collaboration platforms in intensive face-to-face workshops lasting three weeks. When the people trained in the workshops returned home they continued to collaborate online to develop courses. Furthermore they had a multiplier effect because they were required to share their new skills and knowledge with other colleagues in their home institutions.

In August 2006 COL hosted its first training and materials development workshop in Mauritius for educators from 14 Commonwealth Small States. Over a three-week period participants developed online skills to enable them collaboratively to develop learning content for courses in Tour Guiding and Starting Your Own Business. The participants undertook to train colleagues in the skills they had learning after returning home and to continue to contribute to content development.

The success of the VUSSC workshop in Mauritius led to other workshops. Each workshop had a focus on content development including capacity development. The aim was to provide learners with a wide variety of educational opportunities and the flexibility to choose when, where and how they should learn. This takes advantage of one of the greatest strengths of open and distance learning.

Before each workshop, four team leaders and a coordinator from the host country come to Vancouver for four days of orientation. This gives them an understanding of the VUSSC concept and its relevance to the topic area in which they are experts. They plan a learning module to be created during the workshop. There is e-mail interaction with all the participants before the workshop after the team leader orientation, but experience showed that the real interaction starts after people meet face-to-face and have got to know each other.

One challenge is that even after spending time together in the workshops, it can be very challenging for busy people to remain actively involved in online communities of practice once they get home. People in small developing countries are usually engaged in many activities simultaneously and they have to battle with limited bandwidth, large class loads and limited teaching resources.

The workshops are highly practical. Workshops take place in a computer laboratory and buddy-teaching is the most common manner of learning. Lectures and presentations are kept to a minimum in order to maximise practical, hands-on experience. The practical approach that has emerged involves searching for available Open Educational Resources on the Internet, copying, pasting and editing the materials into the COL Instructional Design Template, sharing the drafts with other teams (there are usually five teams), re-editing the content and then restarting the cycle. Each small unit is completed, shared and stored until the end of the workshop when they are all merged into one learning module. The module is edited by an external course developer who consults with the group online to finalise the material for posting on COL's website.

Internet technologies are used so that participants get lots of practice and they maintain contact long afterwards using the IT infrastructure provided by COL. The Instructional Design Template is currently available in multiple formats for ease of use in content creation. The online collaborating platform or workshop space is currently a service called 'BaseCamp'. These two technologies have shown themselves to be most suitable: all participants use MS Word in their daily work, and the private online platform gives them the freedom to communicate with other group members away from the public gaze. All materials to date have been developed in the English language, following the fairly standard practice across Commonwealth countries. However, one course, Disaster Management has been translated into the French language as some of the Small States are bi-lingual.

One participant summarised the impact of the work:

*Improving ICT capacity [is part of the] national agenda; producing learner materials that are relevant to our needs and culture, but also sensitive to global perspectives. ODL allows us to improve education in our outer islands where there is little provision and to offer adult education for working individuals to acquire further qualifications in a way that is convenient for them. (Workshop participant, Seychelles Boot Camp, March 2008)*

#### *Funding*

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation have provided funding for the workshops. This approach has been essential to create momentum for the VUSSC. However, holding course development workshops is expensive. As the eLearning community grows in each country it should be possible in a few years' time to begin collaborative course development in a new area without the necessity of holding a face-to-face workshop – or at least to organise such workshops regionally.

#### *Topics*

Each of the training workshops has brought together a range of educators from a particular topic area selected from the list agreed by the policy-makers. Six of these workshops have been held to date, each hosted by one of the Small States:

2006	Mauritius: Tour Guiding and Starting Your Own Business
2007	Singapore: Training Educators to Design and Develop ODL Materials
2007	Trinidad: Life Skills Development
2007	Samoa: Introduction to Disaster Management
2008	Seychelles: Introduction to Developing and Managing Small-Scale Fisheries
2008	Bahamas: Safety Practices in the Building Construction Industry

**Two further workshops have also been planned:**

2009 November - Samoa: Port Management

2010 Maldives: Agriculture and Agro industry

Creating course materials centrally under contract and then distributing to the Small States them might have been an easy way forward for the VUSSC. But this would have missed the key objective of building the human capacity of national institutions in the Small States. The training workshops were aimed at increasing the technical competence of educators so that they could return to their countries with skills they could apply to their institutions and educational sector. They also returned with course materials they had worked on during the training.

One participant commented:

*This kind of collaboration is a powerful medium to use to develop oneself and country. It is about sharing resources in knowledge and skills, so makes a change for the better, in the life of someone who needs it . . . I have come to see and learn in my lifetime . . . that access to information is a powerful tool. . . now, how to disseminate that information in a structured manner so that it is used in a positive way and empowers individuals for the better, is to me, part of what VUSSC is all about!* (Workshop participant, Samoa Boot Camp, November 2007)

Developing learning content has forced COL to investigate copyright licenses more deeply, especially in the case of Creative Commons licenses. All materials that have been developed carry open copyright licenses such as CC-BY, CC-BY-SA and CC-BY-NC and are available on COL's website.

By February 2009, all 32 Commonwealth Small States (which represent two-thirds of Commonwealth membership) had decided to participate in VUSSC and over 130 people had taken part in workshops facilitated by COL. We estimate that well over 500 additional people have received training from workshop participants and the use of the learning materials continues to expand the benefits.

*Use of the Course Materials*

National institutions that would like to offer educational courses or programmes co-branded with VUSSC go through a process of having the materials or programmes approved within their institution, by the national qualification authority and, where applicable, the regional qualifications authority. Programmes and courses that meet these requirements are posted with their accreditation status on a VUSSC website. This process of encouraging the transfer of courses, qualifications and learners between countries is being facilitated by a credit transfer process through a Transnational Qualifications Framework.

## Developing a Transnational Qualifications Framework

As course materials were being developed VUSSC participants realised that they had to address the issue of quality, credibility and recognition of courses. In partnership with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) they developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF).

The TQF is a ten level framework. It is not meant to replace existing qualifications frameworks in the Small States. It is a translation instrument between the systems in different countries and regions to give momentum to the transfer of courses, qualifications and learners between countries. It will also provide a means by which qualifications frameworks can be compared and allow for referencing of all qualifications to the TQF levels.

VUSSC has created an internet portal that provides online programmes offered by accredited institutions in VUSSC countries. These institutions, having already received accreditation from their national system, will be able to promote selected programmes to the international market through the VUSSC portal. Once eLearning programmes have been approved by the national and regional structures, they will be posted on the VUSSC website. Posting of programmes on the VUSSC website will signify that the programme is credible, i.e. that it aligns with national and regional qualifications structures and relates to the TQF. This is important because, as we noted yesterday, Small States are a favourite prey of degree mills, so establishing the *bona fides* of courses and programmes is vital.

Learners will register for these programmes with the knowledge that programmes offered through the portal will carry the national accreditation of the country in which the providing institution is based. In addition to this, learners will be able to review the comparability of the qualification with their own country by reviewing the qualification's registration in the Transnational Qualifications Framework.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the VUSSC is a new model of collaboration between governments and institutions in Small States that is strengthening their tertiary institutions and networking Ministries of Education. It has been successful at both the individual and the institutional level. Many individuals have enhanced their computer skills and confidence levels through capacity-building in ODL and ICT; involvement in the Wiki community; enhanced teamwork and collaborative skills (which also included increased appreciation for diverse cultural contexts). They have been Monzur E Khoda [rmonzur@bol-online.com] Monzur E Khoda [rmonzur@bol-online.com]exposed to a range of technologies including the COL Instructional Design Template which can be used in an offline environment and the BaseCamp collaboration platform. They have developed and maintained an expanded global network of professional educators – empowered practitioners who feel able to adapt curriculum more freely and participate in an ongoing collaborative learning community.

Tertiary institutions in the Small States are now able to offer educational programmes that are co-branded with VUSSC provided they are approved by the national bodies responsible for quality assurance and or accreditation and where applicable, the Regional Qualifications Authority.

A Management Committee is now directing VUSSC's activities. It is chaired by Dr Emma Kruse Vaai from the University of Samoa and is being supported by COL's Education Specialist for VUSSC, John Lesperance. This signifies yet another accomplishment for the virtual university as the Small States take over the management of the work.

At the 17th Conference for Commonwealth Ministers Education held here in Kuala Lumpur in June, Ministers from Small States at that meeting indicated that they are highly satisfied with the impact of the VUSSC and consider it one of the most successful interventions ever facilitated by an intergovernmental body.