

Virtual University, Flexible Learning: Why a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth?



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VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY, FLEXIBLE LEARNING: Why a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth?

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Introduction: the special context of small states

It is my pleasure to welcome you all to this unique meeting. You have come from all parts of the Commonwealth. I hope you have travelled comfortably to this extraordinary city state of Singapore.

You all come from the small states that make up two-thirds of the 53 countries in membership of the Commonwealth. Small, in this context, refers either to population or to geographical size - or to both. Most of the small states of the Commonwealth are small islands with small populations located in the Caribbean, in the Pacific and in the Indian Ocean. But there are also landlocked states with small populations such as Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana - although Botswana is not small geographically. There are also coastal states with small populations such as The Gambia and Belize, which are geographically small, and Guyana and Namibia, which are rather large.

Despite their diversity small states face common challenges. Commonwealth small states, as well as constituting two-thirds of Commonwealth membership, account for three-quarters of all the world's small states. This means that the Commonwealth intergovernmental organisations, that is to say the Commonwealth of Learning, the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth Secretariat, must lead the international community by the special attention that they give to these states in their work.

What can we say about the general needs of small states? You all come from small states and know much more about the opportunities and the threats that they face than I do. Seen in a world perspective through the lens of the Millennium Development Goals small states do face special challenges.

The first is simply being small. A small territory means that natural resources are limited in quantity and variety. A small population makes it difficult for a country to have skilled and qualified people in all the many occupations and trades that underpin a modern economy. Then there is the tyranny of transport. Small landlocked states face difficulty and expense in getting their traded goods to and from ports in neighbouring countries. Island states face the challenges of distance from markets and the cost of sea and air links.

Lately we have become more sensitive to the special environmental challenges that affect small states. The horror we felt at the terrible impact of Hurricane Katrina on the US mainland should make us recall the hurricane in Grenada, the tsunami in the Maldives and the floods in Guyana and remember that small states are both particularly prone to natural calamities and especially vulnerable to their effects.

Huge countries like India and the USA have the resources and people to help the very small proportion of their total populations that suffered from last year's tsunami and this year's Hurricane Katrina. But although fewer people lost their lives in the Maldives because of the tsunami, and in Grenada because of Hurricane Ivan, the effect on the two societies and their economies was relatively much greater.

Small states have become increasingly conscious of their common needs and are asking international bodies to formulate programmes to address them. Such a request has brought us together here in Singapore. My task, in this opening session, is to answer the question: Why a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth?

In responding to that question I shall describe the origins of the programme and try to answer some other obvious questions: What form will the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (which I shall call the VUSSC) take? Where will it be located? How will it work? Who will take part? When will we see results? Let me address these questions briefly as well.

Origins of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

The origins of the VUSSC go back to the triennial meeting of Commonwealth Ministers of Education that was held in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada in 2000. To understand the genesis of the idea of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth it is important to recall the special context of that Millennium Year - two features in particular.

First, the year 2000 saw a strong focus on development. The largest ever meeting of Heads of Government at the United Nations approved the Millennium Declaration with its eight Millennium Development Goals. Earlier that year the World Forum on Education for All met in Dakar and set six targets for achieving this longstanding but elusive objective.

Second, and in sharp contrast to this concern for improving the lot of the world's poorer people, the rich world got carried away by the dotcom frenzy. The Internet began transforming communication between people and creating new methods of doing business. Online communication also seemed to have the potential to transform education, so both prophets and vendors did not hesitate to claim that older educational methods would soon be swept into the dustbin of history. Henceforward all true learning would take place in front of the computer screen.

These developments created a highly charged atmosphere for the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in Halifax at the end of 2000. On the one hand the Dakar Goals and the Millennium Declaration had increased the ministers' determination to increase access to education at all levels. But on the other, new information and communication technology held both the promise of helping to expand education and the threat of making traditional approaches to teaching and learning obsolete.

At that Conference the ministers from the small states shared their anxiety that their countries did not have the critical mass, either of expertise or of equipment, to engage with online learning in an autonomous fashion. They feared becoming tributary, as so often in the past, to the technologies, systems and materials developed by the larger states.

However, they thought that by working together they might be able to nurture an autonomous capacity for online learning that would enable them to harness these new developments for the benefit of their peoples. The mechanism would be a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. They asked COL to flesh out a formal proposal.

COL did so, bringing some of the ministers together for a meeting in Seychelles in 2003. They sent forward a plan for the VUSSC that was approved by next Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, which was held in Edinburgh at the end of that year. This plan was waiting on my desk when I took office as president of COL in 2004. After reviewing it and making enquiries I reached two conclusions.

First, the atmosphere of urgency - not to say panic - generated by the dotcom frenzy of 2000 now seems ephemeral. When new phenomena appear we often overestimate their short-term impact whilst underestimating their long-term consequences.

By 2004 it was clear that online learning was not going to consign previous educational methods to the dustbin of history. Impartial observers are finding the early applications of online learning somewhat disappointing but note, nevertheless, that it is seeping gradually into all forms and levels of education.

Second, the plan from the Conference of Education Ministers appeared to call for the creation and funding of a new international Commonwealth body, a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth with its own headquarters and organisational structure. My enquiries quickly revealed that the usual donors were not interested in funding any new international organisation, although they were keen to facilitate initiatives in education and training that might result from the VUSSC, especially

if they were linked to agreed development objectives.

We therefore decided to flip the VUSSC over and build it from the bottom up rather than from the top down. At the end of 2004 I wrote to the Minister of Education of each small state asking three questions. First, do you still want to be part of the VUSSC? Second, if so, what are the educational and training objectives that you want to achieve for your country through this mechanism? Third, who is the contact person that you empower to work with COL on this initiative?

About two-thirds of the small states said that they still wanted to participate and we received some very useful statements of priorities. You are the contact people that the ministers named and here we are at our first planning meeting.

Let me emphasise that the VUSSC is an initiative of your ministers of education whose purpose is to assist the development of education and training in small states. This is your project and this meeting is your opportunity to steer it in the directions that your countries want. We at COL are here to facilitate the process and the Government of Singapore, in hosting the meeting, has given you the opportunity to be inspired by the impressive development of the online world that is taking place here.

In the Commonwealth we do not usually list Singapore as a small state because it is now a fully developed country - probably the world's most successful example of development in our lifetimes. However, Singapore is small in both area and population. What has been done in Singapore can be done elsewhere. COL is most grateful to Singapore for giving you a model to emulate.

What will the VUSSC be?

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is an initiative of your countries. Nevertheless, let me seed the discussions that we shall have here by giving some perspectives from the Commonwealth of Learning on how the project might develop. I put these ideas forward simply as a basis for discussion.

First then, what form will the VUSSC take? In the spirit of the 21st century I suggest that it will be a network rather than an institution - a network with multiple nodes of activity. We are not trying to create a new institution with its own brand name but to find ways to reinforce the institutions and the developments that are already taking place in your countries. A common theme of the responses of ministers to my request to tell me about their priorities was the ambition of strengthening their existing post-secondary institutions.

The notion of network partially answers my next question - where will the VUSSC be located? I suggest that it will be located wherever groups of countries and institutions are working together to develop courses or learning materials. COL is content to act as the central node of the network for the time being but we see the real activity taking place in the regions.

How will the VUSSC work? It is a mechanism to help small states work together to produce, adapt and

use courses and learning materials that would be difficult for one state to produce alone.

What will be the subjects? That is for you and your authorities to determine. When we collated the responses from ministers of education we found numerous common topics and programme areas in the submissions from different countries. A first task will be to review these and create coalitions to develop materials in the most salient areas of common interest.

What media will be used? COL knows well that the media and ICT environment is still underdeveloped in many small states, especially outside the main towns. We therefore made it clear to ministers that we saw the VUSSC as a multi-media operation, using whatever medium was appropriate for the purpose, whether print, audio, video, DVD and so on.

However, it was clear from the replies we received that most countries see the VUSSC as a special opportunity to develop expertise in online learning or eLearning.

One of the aims of the VUSSC will be to help ministers to fulfil that ambition. That is another reason why it is particularly appropriate for this meeting to be taking place in Singapore. During the course of this week we shall give each of you real experience in eLearning so that you can take back some new expertise and be better placed to make judgements about it.

This is an appropriate moment for me to point out that in the five years since the ministers of education conceived the idea of the VUSSC, important and helpful developments have occurred in two areas. First, connectivity is increasing and improving fairly rapidly in all countries. It makes sense to prepare now for a time when connectivity will be much more widespread in small states than it is today.

Second, the trend to open educational resources is gaining momentum. Open educational resources, which refer to open course content, open source software and tools are, in COL's view, a key building block for the VUSSC. You could say that open educational resources are the vehicle that can translate into reality the vision that your ministers had in 2000. You will hear much more about OERs at this meeting.

A final point about OERs is that even if, for reasons of connectivity and equipment availability, certain courses are made available to the learners in traditional formats such as print, preparing them by online collaboration between individuals and institutions can greatly speed the processes of development and adaptation.

Another question that I asked earlier was who will take part in the VUSSC. The answer to that is now apparent. Participation will be open to all who are ready to work collaboratively and to share the results of their work.

When will we see results? In the proposal that I made to ministers last year I suggested that the VUSSC would develop in four stages. The first, which is done, is to identify participants and objectives. The second, which will be progressed at this meeting, is to identify common aims and resources. I am confident that if we identify good collaborative projects we can secure financial support for them. The

third stage, which comes next, is to develop content and systems. Finally of course, you will implement elements of the VUSSC with learners.

Obviously the timing of that last step will depend on how fast each coalition works. We imagine that the learning materials that emerge from the VUSSC network will be used in countries as and when they are ready. We do not imagine a great ceremonial launch, rather the gradual introduction of new materials and new methods across the small states of the Commonwealth in an organic manner.

That brings me to a final and very important point. So far my remarks have stressed the creation of learning materials. They are indeed the core of the value that we hope to add to existing institutions through the VUSSC. Let us realise, however, that the successful use of these materials, and their transfer from country to country, will depend crucially on the arrangements that are in place - or can be put in place - for credit transfer, accreditation, the recognition of qualifications from elsewhere, flexibility in residence requirements and so on. Many promising collaborative ventures fall at these hurdles. Part of our task is to remove them from the track.

Conclusion

Progress is being made in credit transfer and recognition in all regions of the Commonwealth, but it will need to speed up if the VUSSC is to fulfil its potential. Fortunately this is an area where COL has useful experience, and also an area where we are working hand in glove with UNESCO. It is a crucial element in the success of the VUSSC.

You are all senior people who appreciate its importance, so I ask you to ensure, when you get back home, that you communicate its importance to your colleagues. The VUSSC will fail if it is seen simply as a vehicle for the collaborative preparation of courses and materials. It must be seen as a network that unites and strengthens the institutions in your countries by enabling them to operate on a larger canvas. That has implications for the way that they work together regionally.

I shall stop there. Once again I thank you for coming and I thank the Government of Singapore and the National Institute of Education for hosting this event with COL. COL and the NIE have already worked together very successfully on improving teacher education in Africa and we are delighted to team up again.

All of us here will work hard this week but I am confident that something important will emerge from our labours.

Back in 2000 the ministers of education of the small states of the Commonwealth were alarmed by the hype surrounding eLearning but sensed that they could benefit by engaging with this new phenomenon. The VUSSC is the vehicle they have selected and you are the people they have chosen to drive it.

I wish you well. You have the possibility, through this new network of transforming education and

training in your countries and putting small states in the forefront of the development of open educational resources.