

Skills Development

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) – Capacity Building in ODL and ICT

Abstract

Dr. Leon Higgs

Director of Higher education and Lifelong Learning

Ministry of Education Bahamas

leonhiggs@gmail.com

In many ways, the key priority in VUSSC was the development of skills in areas of need within educational institutions. Capacity development was limited in the education systems in most small states of the Commonwealth, and thus the need to build capacity systematically. Historically, there has been a strong focus on using one-off professional development workshops as a primary strategy for developing this capacity. However, by themselves, one-off, professional development workshops tend to be of little educational value.

Some interventions seeking to build education capacity in the developing world seem to assume that 'hard' skills can be taught by bringing together employees from many organizations to workshops of between three to five days. Such interventions have little educational merit, as they are simply too brief and too divorced from the day-to-day realities of work to develop any skills. This does not mean that such interventions have no value, but this value lies almost exclusively in their ability to raise awareness about key issues and to showcase distance education practices. If such face-to-face interventions are to hold value as educational interventions, this needs to be as part of a much longer, more sustained intervention of support for distance educators.

This paper will explore how VUSSC has been used to enable sustained, systematic capacity-building to take place with project partners. This capacity development has focused on producing cohorts of designers and developers of course material. This strategy for capacity building was aimed at current and potential coordinators of course design and development for distance education as well as curriculum writers and persons who develop educational resources.

Historical Overview of VUSSC

It was during the 14 Conference of Commonwealth Ministers (CCEM) held in Canada in 2000, that the concept of the VUSSC was conceived by the Ministers of Education. Apart from the fact that 2000 was a year when great emphasis was being placed on the development agenda, the largest ever meeting of Heads of Government at the United Nations had approved the Millennium Declaration with its eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and earlier the World Education Forum in Dakar had set six targets for achieving the long-standing, but elusive objective of education for all (EFA).

In sharp contrast to this concern for improving the lot of the world's poorer people, the rich world was 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, these proponents believed that all true learning would take place in front of the computer screen. (1) Although the MDCs and the EFA goals called for access to education at all levels, Ministers were sceptical, since the role of the internet was still ambiguous. However, they were committed to providing online education to their respective counties, thus increasing access to educational opportunities.

Because the individual countries did not all have the requisite expertise to make online education viable, and because of the cost of such an initiative, Ministers accepted the recommendation that they collaborate together as a network of small states to increase their capacity to offer cost effective online education to their people. This network was called the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC). COL was then asked to develop a formal proposal under the supervision of a ministerial working group.

In 2003, the Ministerial group agreed to a proposal for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) which was presented to Ministers at the 15CCEM later that year (COL 2003). The overriding objective for the VUSSC was that it should help institutions in the small states to serve learners better. The VUSSC has two main aims: (1) to expand tertiary education in its member countries, both face-to-face offerings and distance learning; and (2) to enable the small states to be participants in the world of online learning, thus, bridging the digital divide.

Based on research done by COL, it was determined that donors were not interested in funding a new inter-governmental agency or central office for a university consortium. However, they did express interest in the education and training outcomes that the VUSSC might yield, especially if they were linked to agreed development objectives.

COL decided, therefore, to build the VUSSC more from the bottom up rather than from the top down, by working in the area of capacity building, rather than of constructing a consortium head office. It was quickly found that countries were not keen to have a new institution created that would compete with their existing institutions. The new organisation would need to help to build capacity of existing institutions, to support the creation of accreditation mechanisms and to facilitate the offering of educational programmes by small states for themselves and others.

In 2004, two-thirds of the countries stated that they were interested in participating in the VUSSC and they gave a list of topics for the VUSSC to develop. Most were not degree programmes but shorter, skills-related post secondary courses in areas like tourism and hospitality management, small business development and entrepreneurship, professional development for the education and health sectors, life skills, construction, fisheries, and disaster management.

Knowing that the IT infrastructure was under developed in many of the small states, especially outside the principal towns, COL suggested to Ministers that despite the use of the term 'virtual' in the VUSSC title, it might be appropriate to develop courses in multi-media or flexible formats, rather than as pure eLearning material. Ministers replied that although they understood the concern, they considered it a priority for the VUSSC to create capacity and capability for eLearning and the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in education, in addition to increasing the range of educational offerings in their countries.

Capacity Building Definition

The main concern of the Ministers of Education was the need for capacity building in e-learning, the need for wider use of information and communication technology and the need to increase the range of educational offerings in their respective countries.

Capacity building is usually referred to when considering the assistance that is given to various societies in Countries of the South that have a need for development in specific skills or competencies. Although the term "capacity building" was coined during the 90's when the UNDP defined it as "the creation of an enabling environment with appropriate policy and legal frameworks, institutional development, including community participation, human resources development and strengthening of managerial systems", (2) the concept was around since the early 70's when the UNDP offered advice to governments on what it called institutional building, which referred to the development of national organizations in various areas such as health, nutrition and education. (3). It should be noted however that capacity building is not just training, but also involves the: development of human resources by equipping individuals with the understanding, skills and access to information, knowledge and training to perform effectively. Secondly, it is the development of an organizational structure to strengthen management processes and procedures, not only with organizations, but also the management of relationships between organizations and different sectors. Thirdly, capacity building facilitates the development of an institutional and legal framework to enable organizations, institutions and agencies at all levels and in all sectors to enhance their capacities (Urban capacity Building Network www.gdrc.org).

According to Capacity Building Guide, "Capacity is the essential lubricant of international development, more important than finance" (<http://uk.oneworld.net/capacitybuilding>). More recently, the United Nations Development Programme has defined "capacity" as "the ability of individuals, institutions and societies to perform functions, solve problems, and set and achieve objectives in a sustainable manner" The terms "capacity building" or "capacity development" describes the task of establishing human and institutional capacity (<http://uk.oneworld.net/capacitybuilding>).

One of the ways in which capacity building is carried out, is through the use of Information and Communications Technologies (ITC) at all levels of organizations. For example, e-government can encourage citizens to become more proactive in national decision making, thus making governments more accountable and effective. (4) Distance and e-learning are also modalities that are also becoming more prevalent in developing countries.

Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) play a pivotal role in capacity building in these developing countries. In keeping with the overall philosophy of capacity building, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) through the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) utilized at least three modalities of instructions, namely the face-to-face workshops called Bootcamp, online instruction, and the development of a Total Quality Framework (TQF). These modalities are highly effective in building capacities in participating countries.

Boot Camp

Creating Open Educational Resources (OER) Online/Workshops

The representatives of the small states asked COL to facilitate the joint development of eLearning materials in the form of OER as the first VUSSC activity. COL decided for several reasons that the creation of course materials in each topic area should begin with a three-week face-to-face workshop. First, it was necessary to spread the sense of ownership of the VUSSC from Ministries of Education to the tertiary institutions and make this virtual initiative more realistic to them. Second, many of the subject experts charged with creating open and distance-learning materials had little experience of eLearning and online collaboration skills that could most readily be acquired in a workshop setting. Third, an important objective was to create an academic community across the small states for each subject that would remain active after the workshop participants returned home and continued their collaborative work on course development.

Eight of these workshops have been held to date, each hosted by one of the small states. The Boot camps are designed to achieve the following set of progressive outcomes:

1. Learn to work collaboratively in online environments and to use a range of technologies in education;
2. Create a set of "finished" materials in the COL Instructional Design Template (using an online project management space called "BaseCamp");
3. Publish these on COL's website for anyone to use;
4. Accredite these course materials with at least one institution; and
5. Offer the course to learners in member countries.

Various methodologies are used during the workshops. Four team leaders and a coordinator (who is also a team leader, but from the host country) are taken to Vancouver about a month before the workshop. Participants undergo four days of orientation on the task of facilitating the workshop. During this time, they gain an understanding of the VUSSC concept, the relevance of the topic area in which they are using their expertise for VUSSC, and they plan a learning module to be created during the ensuing workshop in their respective countries. There is some interaction with all the participants before the workshop (after the team leader orientation), but experience shows that most real interaction starts after people have met face-to-face and spent time getting to know each other.

Participants of the workshops learn and work in a very practical way. Workshops take place in a computer laboratory and buddy-teaching is the most used manner of learning. Lectures and presentations are kept to a minimum and practical, hands-on experience is maximised. The practical methodology 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.

To date, some 463 people have participated in either policy-level meetings or immersion training workshops. The participants of international workshops have trained others in their home countries and gone on to have notable impacts on their own educational systems (Dunlop, 2008). An important by-product of the workshops is that each participant passes on the ICT skills they have acquired to other colleagues once they get home, thus increasing substantially the pool of ICT-capable people in the ministries and institutions of the States. Another important aspect of the workshop is that lecturers with bachelor's degrees interact with those with PhD's and those with ICT skills interact with those who have very little ICT skills. The workshops blend together networking between the participants. This is high level capacity building.

The Management Team of VUSSC has kept in touch with many of the Boot Camp participants and has periodically received feedback on some of their activities once they returned home. Here are excerpts from some of the written experiences:

I was a team leader for VUSSC WS5 Seychelles, served as representative at the Interlocutor's meeting, helped to facilitate VUSSC WS6 and then completed the VUSSC/UWI Open Campus course 'Managing & Facilitating Online Instruction'. All of these experiences, especially the latter, piqued my interest in the role of technology in education and the potential of distance education for decentralizing learning opportunities in our archipelago. Moreover, I gained the confidence I needed to pursue studies online and thus enrolled at Nova Southeastern University to complete my Master's degree in Curriculum, Instruction & Technology. What more fitting medium than distance education for this degree..... As an active member of BREEF, I also collaborated online with a U.S. based film-maker to create an education guide to accompany the film she created about the paradox of coastal people not knowing how to swim. We should tie up this project by month's. I'vealso collaborated with teams in Eleuthera, Exuma, Grand Bahama, San Salvador and the U.S. to facilitate public education and outreach projects and produce learning resources related to marine conservation/environmental sustainability. Most of this collaboration is done via distance using technology.

Another student stated:

At VUSSC workshop in Singapore, I was given training in Moodle and online materials.

I was able to share my Moodle training with Faculty at the College during the past five months through online Workshops. Also, I got the opportunity to teach the pilot Math Moodle course at the College. I also, gave a workshop on resending information in an online environment.

A third student said:

....my participation in the Virtual University for Small States of The Commonwealth (VUSSC) has made our institution to think out of the box in delivering education to those who are desirous of increasing their knowledge level through ODL, this virtual classroom participation has expanded the student enrolment and allows one to adequately address and assess each one individually or collectively as a group. Upon completion of our workshop we were mandated to return to our various countries, institutions and ministries to share these skills and knowledge with others by the Vice Chancellor and President of the University of Samoa. Thebeing an archipelago, my students are on every island therefore the size of the classroom has no limits Even to the wider world the potential is awesome. The course content of the (VUSSC) workshop is responsible for GMNI incorporating software which the students use to study material ahead of my arrival and I also have the ability to critique through e-mails, even persons who are challenge with literary skills.....

These three examples are a very small sample of the testimonials that have been received from some participants of the VUSSC workshops. These examples also show that face-to-face interventions that entail a sustained period of time are far more effective than just a one or two day workshop or meeting.

Apart from the Boot Camp workshops, VUSSC has facilitated on-line courses utilizing the service of such institutions as the University of the West Indies Open Campus. At least forty three (43) participants from across the Commonwealth have completed these courses.

Transnational Qualification Framework

Along with the Bootcamp workshops and the on-line courses, VUSSC has also created a transnational qualification Framework--- another capacity building intervention. By the end of 2007, nearly all the Commonwealth small states had joined the VUSSC initiative. Those participating states are scattered all over the world. In order to facilitate the use of jointly developed course in all states, the VUSSC has worked with the South African Qualifications Authority to develop a Transnational Qualification Framework (TQF). Its purpose is to aid comparability between regions and help give credibility to the eLearning courses developed within the framework of the VUSSC and offered internationally.

VUSSC has created an internet portal or hub that provides online programming 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 provided by these countries and 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 is in alignment with national and regional qualifications structures and relates to the TQF.

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 Qualification Framework. This question of credibility is particularly important for small states, some of which, advertently or inadvertently, have acquired reputations as havens for degree mills.

Conclusion

The Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth is an emerging network of Ministries of Education that is working to strengthen national tertiary institutions. It embraces professional human resource development, the creation and offering of new courses and the establishment of a transnational accreditation mechanism. These countries, comprising of both land-locked and island states, all face issues of isolation and brain drain and are mostly very susceptible to various impacts of climate change.

With no prior examples to follow that quite matched the circumstances and requests, a new model was developed, along with an action learning approach that enabled the methodology to be changed based on lessons learned. The international workshops have

helped to improve the ICT skills of professional educators who have, in turn, trained colleagues in the use of computers and collaborating online. Materials are developed using COL's Instructional Design Template and shared using online project management services. Materials that have been developed carry open copyright licenses such as CC-BY, CC-BY-SA and CC-BY-NC and are available on the COL web site.

Now that an increasing number of professional educators have stronger ICT skills, online training can be offered to an enlarged group of people. The establishment of a TQF portal will help to increase the credibility of programmes offered by small states. National institutions that wish to offer educational programmes that are co-branded with VUSSC will have these approved within the institution, by the national qualification authority and where applicable, the regional qualification authority. The programmes that fulfil these requirements will be posted with their accreditation status on the VUSSC website.

When examined against the literature and best practices, it could be said that the VUSSC initiative has been a great success in building capacity in ICT and Open Distance Education in the Small States of the Commonwealth.

References

COL (Commonwealth of Learning) A Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (Presentation to the 15th Conference of Commonwealth Ministers, Edinburgh

COL (2006) Instructional Design Template. www.col.org/vussc

Dunlop, C.C. (2008) Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth: monitoring and evaluation update. Available online at: www.colfinder.net/vussc_ME_Update_Dunlop.pdf. Accessed 7 October 2008).

Daniel, John & West, Paul (2008) What is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth? A guide for Commonwealth Vice-Chancellors. Conference of Executive Heads, Hyderabad, India, 29 November 2008

Daniel, John & West, Paul, The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. Article for the special issue of Open Learning on OERs. www.col.org/vussc

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

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/capacitybuilding>

One World Guide. <http://uk.oneworld.net/guides/capacity/building>

UNESCO Communication and Information Sector's news service. September 7, 2009 (Paris), ICT Changing the face of higher education.

Footnotes

1. Daniels & West, the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. Article for the Special Issue of Open Learning on OERs.
2. Capacity Building – Wikipedia, the free Encyclopaedia
3. Capacity Building – Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopaedia
4. Capacity :Building One World Guide