



The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth: Its journey, evolution and future

Transcript

Professor Asha Kanwar
President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning
at the 19th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (19CCEM)
Ministerial Pre-conference Meeting
Nassau, The Bahamas
June 2015

Chair, Honourable Ministers, Deputy Secretary-General and distinguished colleagues,

It is an honour to be here at 19th Conference of Education Ministers. The purpose of my presentation is to give you an idea of how VUSSC moved from concept to implementation and the contribution this initiative is making to building national capacities and its contribution to strengthening human resource development in your countries.

The turn of the century witnessed the dot.com boom. Ministers of education were worried about the rise of online universities and how this could negatively impact on small states, which stood at a disadvantage compared to larger countries. The ministers from the small states were determined that their countries should engage with the online world and increase access to tertiary education in their countries but doubted that they had the critical mass, of either expertise or equipment, to engage with virtual learning on their own. The ministers were concerned that their countries were on the wrong side of the digital divide, had inadequate access to tertiary education which resulted in brain drain, lacked the capacity to benefit from the developments in technology and would have difficulty in meeting the MDG and EFA goals.

The idea for VUSSC was proposed by Ministers of Education at the 14CCEM.

The proposal for VUSSC was accepted by Ministers at the 15CCEM in Edinburgh and COL was assigned the responsibility of implementing this initiative.

The overriding objective for the VUSSC that emerged from the original proposal to ministers is that it should help institutions in the small states to serve learners better.

It was agreed that this Virtual University would be unique. It would:

- Enable small states to be active contributors, by developing a cadre of people with the skills and expertise to implement virtual education systems
- Strengthen existing tertiary institutions
- Be responsive and be able to change quickly to take into account emerging needs
- Permit the delivery of courses in a variety of formats according to available technologies.

By the time COL began working with the small states in 2004 to implement the plan for the VUSSC, the context for its creation had changed in several respects.

By 2004 it was clear that online learning was not going to render all previous educational methods obsolete. But although some of the early applications of eLearning had been disappointing, it was also clear that it had great potential and was beginning to seep gradually into all forms and levels of education.

COL decided, therefore, to build the VUSSC from the bottom up rather than from the top down. The new organisation would be a network rather than a new university competing with existing providers.

VUSSC started its activities by strengthening the capacity of institutions and educators in open and distance learning using appropriate technologies while at the same time developing free content.

Today VUSSC has grown into a robust network of 32 small states, including Sierra Leone, dedicated to expanding access to tertiary education. VUSSC is therefore a network of for and by the small states. It has been a powerful forum for connecting the Commonwealth and promoting Commonwealth collaboration.

And on this note, I would like to welcome Fiji as a new member of virtual university.

This collaborative network represents two thirds of the Commonwealth membership and is supported by a Management Committee consisting of six representatives from all regions of the Commonwealth.

A new management committee will soon replace the current one which has served its term. We acknowledge the contributions made by the members. The VUSSC Education Specialist also sits on the committee as an ex-officio member.

What has the VUSSC achieved so far?

VUSSC has held several capacity building workshops in the use of technology enabled learning. Participants of the workshops learned to develop online courses in a very practical way. VUSSC has developed thirteen courses which were identified by the small states themselves. These are now being shared freely as open educational resources or OER. Institutions have started to offer these courses. VUSSC has its own web presence and a Learning Management System (LMS) for participating institutions to use.

First let us look at capacity. To date 86 institutions have participated in VUSSC activities and you can see a few on the screen. As you can see, the number of institutions that have participated in VUSSC activities is quite impressive.

More than 53,000 people have been trained through VUSSC activities since 2006. VUSSC has reached more 700 learners and the number of institutions offering these courses continues to grow.

Second, the courses delivered under this initiative. Ten institutions in 8 countries have started to offer VUSSC courses and programmes. Institutions are offering these through a variety of means mainly through conventional, online or blended modes.

The National University of Samoa has been offering the VUSSC developed Diploma in Sustainable Agriculture since 2011. The first group of students graduated in 2013 after having completed the programme and the most rewarding experience of all this is that all graduates are in full-time employment.

Third more open courses are now available. VUSSC has developed more than 13 courses and programmes which were the identified by the small states themselves. These are now being shared freely as open educational resources or OER. Institutions have started to offer these courses.

Some of these courses are quite fitting for addressing some of the challenges the small states are facing.

VUSSC and the University of the West Indies, School of Business and Applied Studies ROYTEC have been collaborating to contextualize the VUSSC Bachelor of Business and Entrepreneurship or the BBE. The programme is set to launch in 2015 and it has already been accredited by the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago. Funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, an external evaluator conducted an independent analysis and progress of the work. People understand the benefits of collaborative development and sharing of course materials.

Ms. Marcia Musgrove, a teacher at C.V. Bethel Senior High School in The Bahamas, writes to say and I quote “Being a participant and team leader at a VUSSC workshop ...not only helped me to grow in personal ways, but has also spawned a series of opportunities to aid my professional development. I think of it as “The VUSSC Snowball Effect” ... in the tropics’, unquote.

A participant describes her experience after attending one of the VUSSC workshops.

I quote “The workshop has motivated me to develop additional course materials for my own institution. The availability of the course template we’ve used is very helpful for compiling our own materials. The process of developing the courses for the Postgraduate Diploma in Education has refreshed my research skills and helped me realize that there is so much information out there and that our own students, not to mention us lecturers, need the opportunity to be exposed to it.”, unquote.

(Source: VUSSC 2014 M&E report)

The UKOU Research Hub conducted a survey to assess the use of OER by formal learners in India, the small states of the Commonwealth and the Open Learn UK. Students in developing countries, especially small states showed high levels of satisfaction with OER in terms of increased interest, better collaboration with peers and improved grades.

By 2007, most of the Commonwealth small states had joined the VUSSC initiative. The participating states are scattered all over the world. In order to facilitate the use of jointly developed courses in all states the VUSSC developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF). Its purpose is to aid comparability between regions and to give credibility to the eLearning courses developed.

The TQF was revised this year and the TQF Management Committee took the lead in this review. This is quite significant because initially COL sought the help of the South African Qualifications Authority to help develop the TQF. The small states are now taking the lead in implementation of VUSSC.

When senior officials met in Malaysia in March this year they also approved the referencing of the TQF against National and Regional Qualifications Frameworks which included the European Qualifications Framework. This is yet another milestone for VUSSC. A qualification emanating from any participating states will be recognized throughout the Commonwealth provided it has met all the quality assurance criteria of the national, regional and transnational qualifications frameworks.

At the same meeting, the TQF management committee also approved the registration of six programmes on the TQF which is also another first for VUSSC.

In Vanuatu, VUSSC has partnered with the Ministry of Education and Training to test a technology to deliver content to remote areas and places without internet using Aptus, which is a device that provides wireless connectivity to smart phones, tablets and laptops via an offline wifi network. Aptus allows these devices to access offline materials for use in the classroom by students. Aptus is an innovation that can transform teaching and learning and it can provide access to offline Moodle courses, students' information system, a file server, Wikipedia and more.

VUSSC is also working in partnership with the Commonwealth Youth Affairs Division and University of the West Indies to convert the Diploma and Degree in Youth Work into OER and more institutions will have access to the Youth Programme which will also be registered on the TQF.

Another technology that has been making quite a buzz in education is massive open online course commonly known as MOOC. One of its advantages is that it can reach very large number of learners and it is a very simple technology to use when compared to other eLearning platforms.

VUSSC is exploring the use of MOOCs to reach large numbers of learners and it has partnered with the Indian Institute of Technology in Kanpur to test a new platform call mooKIT which is a MOOC management system. COL has successfully tested the technology which has proved very successful.

VUSSC will launch mooKIT in September 2015 and will be tried in Seychelles and Samoa. Some of the programmes that VUSSC will use for the pilot are instructional design, curriculum development, ICT for educators, short professional programmes and courses that would be constructed around a qualification leading towards a postgraduate diploma in education.

In the impact evaluation of COL, the evaluators had these to say regarding recommendations for VUSSC.

Strategic Engagement – When institutions commit to ODL and OER strategically and at the highest level, then outcomes and impact improve when compared to a generalized but unspecific interest. Securing strategic commitment will be critical for the next stage of growth for VUSSC.

Policy Commitment for ODL and OER – Government policy commitment to ODL and OER is also key to the next phase of development of VUSSC. In the next 6 year plan, VUSSC should target policy commitment for ODL, OER and TQF in each of the Small States.

Rethink Design, Development, Deployment and Delivery – So as to get more programs available faster, COL needs to look at imaginative ways to increase not just capacity but also speed. The systematic use of MOOC's to boost skills prior to boot camps, focused boot camps using the tools of rapid course development, more extensive use of template based design and development, adoption of “teach less learn more” and the full integration of the exiting bank of OER resources coupled with the use of “smart” assessment tools could get course modules and programs into use faster. This is key for sustaining momentum and growing the use of the TQF.

Strengthen the sense of community – close to 50,000 have been “touched” in some way by VUSSC, including over 723 students. This is a significant alumni network that could become advocates and ambassadors for VUSSC and, subsequently, the TQF. Systematic approaches to alumni development would encourage others to seek out and participate in the future work of VUSSC.

VUSSC is your initiative and we need your support in implementing these recommendations.

VUSSC has achieved its objectives in terms of building the capacity of institutions and individuals, develop content and development and implementation of a TQF.

Moving forward we would like to seek your guidance to identify what should be the priority for VUSSC and these are two questions we would like to put forward.

What more needs to be done?

How can VUSSC support your agenda of priorities of promoting learning for sustainable development?

We also want you to endorse the the revised TQF which has already been approved by the senior officials responsible for quality assurance and accreditation when they met in Malaysia in March this year.

Thank you for your kind attention.