

The evolution of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

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Introduction

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) is an initiative of the education ministers of the 32 small countries that account for two-thirds of Commonwealth membership. The name, as it implies, is rather misleading. VUSSC is not a new tertiary level institution but rather a collaborative network aimed at strengthening and developing the existing tertiary institutions in these states.

VUSSC was conceived by ministers of education at the triennial Conference of Commonwealth Ministers of Education in 2000. In 2003, the concept of a virtual university as a network was approved by ministers, and the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) was requested to help countries collaborate and strengthen the capacity of national education institutions.

Capacity building, and training and development workshops

VUSSC has evolved into a model whereby countries can collaborate and strengthen the capacity of their national educational institutions through a process of collectively developing course materials.

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

To press forward with capacity building, VUSSC has started to offer e-learning courses. There have been five offerings of two additional VUSSC courses to date: Managing and Facilitating Online Instruction and Linux for IT Managers. These have been provided in partnership with national institutions and training providers.

The first three-week training workshop was held in Mauritius, attended by educators from 14 countries. Lessons learned from this first experience have helped to form the basis for an evolving training programme for educators from the small states in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in education.

Each of the training workshops, often referred to as 'bootcamps', has brought together a range of educators and experts from a particular subject area selected from the list agreed by the policy-makers. To date, eight workshops have been held, each hosted by one of the small states:

- 2006 – Mauritius: *Tourism and Entrepreneurship*
- 2007 – Singapore: *Professional Development for Education*
- 2007 – Trinidad & Tobago: *Life Skills*
- 2007 – Samoa: *Disaster Management*
- 2008 – Seychelles: *Fisheries*
- 2008 – Bahamas: *Construction*
- 2009 – Samoa: *Maritime*
- 2010 – Maldives: *Agriculture*

The bootcamps are designed to achieve the following set of progressive outcomes:

- To learn to work collaboratively in online environments and to use a range of technologies in education;
- To create a set of 'finished' materials using an Instructional Design Template;
- To publish these on COL's website for public use;
- To accredit these course materials with at least one institution; and
- To offer the course to learners in member countries.

The VUSSC 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), VUSSC 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; rather, 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. Its aim is to provide a means by which qualifications frameworks can be compared and to enable referencing of all qualifications against 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 e-learning programmes have been approved by the national and regional structures, they will be posted on VUSSC's website. Posting of programmes on the website will signify that the

programme is credible; i.e., that it aligns with national and regional qualifications structures and relates to the TQF.

Learners will be able to 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, learners will be able to review the comparability of the qualification with their own country by reviewing the qualification's registration in the TQF.

Management of VUSSC

The year 2008 probably marked the tipping point when the participating states took over the management of VUSSC through the creation of a formal steering committee (the VUSSC Management Committee) as well as a group to oversee the development and implementation of the TQF (the TQF Management Committee).

Today, the VUSSC Management Committee (VUSSCMC) is now directing VUSSC's activities. This signifies yet another accomplishment for the Virtual University as the small states take over the management of the work.

Benefits of VUSSC

VUSSC has been successful in achieving a wide range of outcomes, especially at the level of the individual participant. Some of these outcomes are also already being manifested as larger-scale benefits to member countries. It is anticipated that more benefits will be evident over time.

Benefits to participants

- Enhanced computer skills and confidence levels.
- Capacity building in open and distance learning (ODL) ICTs.
- Involvement in the Wiki community.
- Enhanced teamwork and collaborative skills.
- Increased appreciation for diverse cultural contexts.
- Exposure to a range of technologies including the COL Design Template and BaseCamp.
- Expanded global network of professional educators.
- Empowered practitioners – able to adapt curriculum freely.
- Empowering educators in the development of ODL materials.
- Participation in an ongoing collaborative learning community.

Benefits to member countries

- Content developed for various courses to be adapted and accessed in local context.
- Expanded pool of local capacity through ongoing training from bootcamp participants.
- Local educators become more competent in the use of ICTs in education.
- Empowering students through additional open and distance course offerings.
- Increasing access to education through free content, thus helping to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Conclusion

VUSSC is working to strengthen tertiary level institutions in small states as a network of ministries of education. It focuses on the development of human resources, the creation and offering of new courses, and the establishment of a transnational accreditation mechanism. Participating countries all face issues of isolation and brain drain, and are susceptible to the various impacts of climate change.

Through VUSSC, COL has provided a new model of collaboration to governments. The model is based on action learning that enables the methodology to be changed as lessons are learned. The tangible benefits to VUSSC member countries are already apparent. In addition, national institutions are now able to offer educational programmes that are co-branded with VUSSC, provided they are approved by a national authority and, where applicable, a regional body responsible for qualifications and quality assurance.

VUSSC has been extensively evaluated (Dunlop, 2008a; 2008b) with very positive results. It has proved challenging to evaluate every outcome, because even in small states it is impossible to track all uses of the learning materials and the impact of expanding the number of trained people.

References

- Dunlop, C.C. (2008a). *Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth: Evaluation – Interim Report*. Vancouver, Canada: The Research and Evaluation Unit, Simon Fraser University.
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