

Increasing access to higher education in small states

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The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) is a groundbreaking initiative that is transforming lives and livelihoods in some of the smallest and poorest states in the Commonwealth. Since the concept was first discussed over a decade ago, VUSSC has brought together educators from 33 small states of the Commonwealth to build capacity and develop tertiary-level courses and degree programmes that can be freely accessed and adapted to local contexts.

The birth of VUSSC

The idea for VUSSC originated at the Commonwealth Ministers of Education Conference in Halifax, Canada, in 2000. Ministers of education from several small states expressed a concern: with the rapid growth of the Internet and eLearning, would their countries be left behind? The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) was asked to conduct a review exploring how these countries could advance their education systems. COL's recommendations were approved by the education ministers three years later, and the VUSSC was born.

VUSSC is designed to address the unique challenges of small states. Access to educational materials is a significant obstacle to using education in the development of nations, particularly in these countries. Defined by their number of inhabitants and relative isolation more than their geographic size, small nations are often characterised by limited natural resources and a small, often unskilled, population. Landlocked states face challenges in transporting goods, while island states are confronted by the high cost of sea and air links. Small states are often more vulnerable to natural disasters and are less able to recover than countries with more resources and larger populations.

In this context, small states stand to gain substantially from increased learning opportunities. Huge advances in technology in recent years have enabled small states to connect, collaborate and be included in the 'Knowledge Revolution'.

VUSSC is not a traditional bricks-and-mortar institution. It is a consortium of ministries of education and institutions enabled by information and communication technology (ICT) applications, working together to plan programmes, develop the required content, and ensure delivery of these programmes and support services to learners.

First step: building capacity

To form a network where small countries all contribute to the development of course materials, participants first need to form

relationships with peers in other countries. In addition, they must learn to collaborate online.

In August 2006, COL hosted its first 'boot camp', or training and materials development workshop, in Mauritius. This was specifically designed for educators from 13 Commonwealth small states. Over a three-week period, participants developed online skills to enable them to collaboratively develop learning content for courses in entrepreneurship and tourism. After the participants returned home they continued to contribute to content development and were committed to training colleagues in the skills they learned.

The success of the VUSSC workshop in Mauritius led to subsequent workshops in The Bahamas, Lesotho, Maldives, Samoa, Seychelles, Singapore, and Trinidad and Tobago. Each workshop had a focus for content development, including life skills, professional development of educators and disaster management. The aim was to provide learners with a wide variety of educational opportunities, together with the flexibility to choose when, where and how they learn – one of the greatest strengths of open and distance learning.

Most recently, in March 2012, educators from The Bahamas, Botswana, Jamaica, Mauritius, Namibia, Samoa and Seychelles took part in a ten-day VUSSC workshop at the University of Seychelles (UniSey) to develop a tertiary-level programme in Environmental Science. The Bachelor in Environmental Science will be an applied BSc degree with three exit points: Certificate, Diploma and Bachelor's degree. UniSey officially launched the Environmental Science programme at the closing of the workshop, and now offers the online programme to learners from all small states of the Commonwealth.

To date, over 200 people have taken part in VUSSC training and materials development workshops, with many of the participants subsequently conducting training workshops in their own country. In all, more than 11,500 people have been trained or reached as a result of VUSSC, according to a recent COL study.

Collaborating for accreditation

Since VUSSC is an international course development initiative and not an accrediting or awarding body, institutions that offer courses must accredit them locally. As a result, VUSSC partners have developed a system of accreditation for VUSSC courses that facilitates the movement of courses and learners between states – the Transnational Qualification Framework (TQF). This makes it possible for courses and degree programmes created for VUSSC to

be adapted into recognised courses that students can take for credit through educational institutions in small states. The Framework is an important element that discourages bogus providers (known as 'degree mills') that try to sell fake qualifications online.

Developed by small states for small states

The VUSSC website (www.vussc.org) is a gateway to freely available post-secondary education for small states of the Commonwealth. The online portal offers access to courses in five subject areas: business, education, public sector, technology and tourism. Since the learning materials are available as open educational resources (OER), learners and educators can freely access, adapt and re-use them. An important factor is that all courses have been developed by small states for small states.

In addition to online materials, the VUSSC website offers tips for learning online and adapting learning materials. It also features the Moodle learning management system, an open source web application for producing, offering and managing online courses.

Originally spearheaded by COL, VUSSC is now led by a management committee with representation from all regions of the Commonwealth. Small states of the Commonwealth are discovering the benefits of participating in this collaborative learning community. The VUSSC training workshops are helping to develop a global network of empowered practitioners who have the skills to develop, share and use quality OER.

For VUSSC member states, this increased competence in using ICT is extending to other areas of teaching and learning. Small states are enjoying cost savings from being able to access free learning materials and from students who can now study at home rather than having to travel for their education.

VUSSC is helping small states harness the potential of eLearning. As more learners access VUSSC courses, they will acquire the skills and training they need to improve their livelihoods and contribute to development in their country.

Reference

Dunlop, C. (2011). *Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth Monitoring and Evaluation Report*. Commonwealth of Learning.

John Lesperance joined the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in 2009 as Education Specialist, VUSSC. Formerly the Director of Further Education Development, Ministry of Education, Seychelles, he has worked in the field of curriculum development for open and distance learning institutes for several years. He has also been involved with the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) as a team leader and interlocutor, and is a member of the Seychelles Qualification Authority Board.