The Challenges facing Small States

If international online courses are to play a significant role in the expansion of education they must be placed within a global framework of quality assurance and qualifications recognition that inspires confidence.

This initiative reflects the Commonwealth's special focus on the small states (usually defined as having populations of fewer than 1.5 million) that make up a majority of Commonwealth membership (32 out of 53 countries). They include the island countries in the Caribbean, the Pacific, Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean as well as the landlocked states of Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana, and the coastal states of The Gambia, Belize, Guyana and Namibia. Despite their variety, these small states face common challenges. One is simply being small, another is costly transport and a third is proneness to environmental challenges, climate change and natural disasters. All the world's small states, three-quarters of which are members of the Commonwealth, are increasingly conscious of their common needs and expect international bodies to address them.

Transnational Qualifications Framework

A 30-country international online course development initiative like the VUSSC poses challenges of qualifications frameworks and qualifications recognition. Nothing like this has been done before. Courses
developed under the aegis of the VUSSC are intended to be adapted and offered in many countries. But since the VUSSC is not an accrediting or awarding body, the institutions that offer the courses must accredit them locally.

When course materials are developed, they are copyrighted under a Creative Commons license that permit adaptation (derivative works) and at least use of the materials for non-profit purposes. Legal counsel provided to institutions that use the so-called "non-commercial" restriction, point out that the recovery of all costs is permitted, including materials, salaries and overheads. Provided a profit is not included in the budget, the materials may be used. This means that materials provided free of cost by institutions like the Open University of the United Kingdom and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) may be used by any participating VUSSC country.

The materials that institutions like those just mentioned create and share are frequently called "open educational resources" - these are teaching and learning resources that are made available at no cost for others to use. These are usually customisable and institutions that adopt them need only recognise their source when aggregating the units and creating course materials.

The more the VUSSC training and materials development workshops give rise to new course materials, partly being compiled from other sources, partly newly developed, the more these new courses will be implemented in multiple countries. And learners will be studying across borders and moving across borders with new qualifications.

When VUSSC started, the Ministers wanted people to be able to help ensure that citizens working in other countries would have their qualifications recognised. Having an agreed translation mechanism for qualifications would also ease the recognition of people with incoming qualifications.


Leading up to this meeting, COL has been working with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), which has an impressive track record in the field, to create a draft concept document of a qualifications framework for the VUSSC. South Africa is not a small state and will not be a direct beneficiary of the TQF. The role of SAQA officially ends after this meeting with the completion of the concept document, the draft of which we all have ready read. Their role here is as an expert consultant and not as a participant. We are fortunate to also have a few other people from other countries who will also help to facilitate the proceedings.

The participants in this meeting are people who lead the implementation of national qualifications authorities from about 30 countries, all small and island states of the Commonwealth.

The aim of a TQF should be to ensure that all the open educational resources that are being created collaboratively can be adapted into recognised courses that students can take for credit through the tertiary institutions of the small states. If the TQF can act as a translation point for modules and
qualifications between countries, the small states of the Commonwealth will have achieved much of what many larger countries dream of having.

An additional benefit of a TQF may be to discourage bogus providers, which are particularly active in trying to sell fake qualifications in the small states.

Our task from here will be lead by James Keevy who will summarise what you have already ready in the TQF document. We will need to provide refinements for James to input into the concept document and then we need to agree on the conceptual framework and the mechanisms and procedures to make this work. We need to have an implementable plan by Friday including basic processes that can be implemented following this meeting. We will not be able to call another face-to-face meeting like this due to costs so we will need to migrate our discussions and processes into the online world as we bid our farewells.

The work of this week is critically important as it can support the intentions the ministers had back in 2000 while showing the world how the small states of the Commonwealth can take a leading role in education.

References

Böhm, A. Meares, D. et al. (2002) *Global Student Mobility 2025: Analysis of Global Competition and Market Share*, IDP Australia


COL (Commonwealth of Learning) (2008b) *The Cape Town Declaration on "Open Education"* [http://www.col.org/capetowndeclaration](http://www.col.org/capetowndeclaration)
