

# *Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth*

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*Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, Programme Development Workshop, Maseru, Lesotho, 10 March 2011*

## **Introduction**

Honourable Minister, Dr Mamphono Khaketla, Vice-Chancellor, Professor Sharon Siverts, Director of the Institute of Extramural Studies, Dr Manthoto Lephoto, Participants in the VUSSC course development workshop, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am delighted that we are holding this workshop in Lesotho and I thank you for delaying this opening ceremony until I could get here from previous engagements in India and Australia. I am sure you have already made a good start on the work of programme development. Nevertheless, let me express my warm thanks to you, Minister, to Professor Manthoto Lephoto, Dr. Mamolete Mohapi and to all the Lesotho colleagues for your kind hospitality and your work in organising this workshop.

May I say what a pleasure it is to be here in Professor Siverts' first week in office as Vice-Chancellor? She and I were colleagues at UNESCO some years ago and I am delighted that the University of Lesotho can now benefit from her experience and great energy.

Lesotho has a special place in my own affections and those of COL for several reasons.

First, one of my oldest and most respected colleagues in the business of distance education is none other than your Foreign Minister, the Honourable Kenneth Tsekoa. He and I first met three decades ago at a conference of the International Council for Correspondence Education in New Delhi in 1978. At the time he was heading the Lesotho Distance Education Centre and I was at Athabasca University. We then worked together for four years on the programme committee for the next conference of the ICCE that was held in Vancouver in 1982. That was the conference at which the ICCE changed its name and became the International Council for Distance Education.

Our careers have taken interestingly different paths since then and I wish to acknowledge with warm thanks what an active participant in Commonwealth affairs and staunch supporter of the Commonwealth of Learning Ken Tsekoa has been in his roles as Minister of Education and Foreign Minister.

I must also recall that during my seven years at COL the only Commonwealth Prime Minister who has visited our offices in Vancouver is your own Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Pakalitha Mosisilli, Prime Minister of Lesotho, who did us the great honour of visiting with the First Lady, Mrs. 'Mathato Mosisilli, and two ministers, one of whom was Kenneth Tsekoa, in 2009.

It so happened that the school which two of my grandchildren attend on Vancouver Island had collected over \$10,000 dollars to help a school here in Lesotho, so we brought a group of pupils from Deep Cove school to COL to meet the Prime Minister and First Lady. The delegation from Lesotho was kind enough to say that this was a highlight of their visit to Canada.

Allow me to reflect with you for a minute on the place of the Commonwealth Small States in COL's work and the important role of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth is a free association of 54 countries that are united by a commitment to democracy, peace, good governance and equality before the law. It is a highly diverse group of nations, including the world's second largest country by population, India, where I was last week, and its smallest, the Pacific state of Nauru. Yesterday I experienced that diversity on another dimension, when I flew from Australia, a huge island continent surrounded by sea, to your own little landlocked Lesotho.

Lesotho is one of the majority of Commonwealth countries that are small states with population of three million or less – sometimes much less. Most of those 32 countries are island states, but Botswana is landlocked as you are, while Namibia, The Gambia, Belize and Guyana are coastal states.

It follows that COL and other Commonwealth organisations devote special efforts to assisting the small states – and not only the Commonwealth small states. The Commonwealth accounts for three-quarters of the world's small states and so Commonwealth organisations stand up for the interests of all small states in various international bodies.

Those of you attending the workshop have come from all over the world from many different cultures. But I suspect you may have already discovered that special bonds quickly emerge between those from small states wherever they are in the world. Whether there is a special psychology that goes with coming from a small state I don't know, but certainly the small states share many of the same challenges.

Their fragile economies are very sensitive to changes in the terms of trade for their exports, which are mainly agricultural. Transport costs are high for both the landlocked and island nations. Furthermore, they are particularly sensitive to a range of natural disasters: hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis and the general rise in sea-level – though the sea would have to drown most of the world before it threatened Lesotho, the Switzerland of Africa.

Expanding tertiary education in small states is a special challenge. It was well expressed by the Minister of Education of Seychelles in these words. Since he made that statement COL has helped Seychelles to create a university and I was privileged to be present when it was formally opened last year.

The University of Seychelles will draw on partnerships with a number of other institutions around the world – and, of course, partnerships and collaboration are what our Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is all about. Let me take you briefly through the history, with apologies to those who know it well.

## The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

First, let me emphasise what the VUSSC is not. It is not a new university competing with your existing tertiary institutions but a collaborative network for strengthening capacity and developing eLearning materials as open educational resources.

### *Why the VUSSC?*

Why was it created? It may surprise you to know that the idea of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is already more than ten years old. The Ministers from the small states conceived the idea at 14CCEM, the 14<sup>th</sup> Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers held in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada in 2000. There were two special features about that millennial year.

First, the UN's Millennium Declaration and the Dakar World Forum on Education for All had put the spotlight on the imperative of expanding access to education at all levels.

Second, however, the rich world was carried away by the dotcom frenzy as the Internet began to introduce radical changes to business and communication. Prophets and vendors claimed that henceforward all true learning would take place in front of the computer screen.

Many of the ministers from small countries were worried that their individual states did not have the critical mass, either of trained people or of IT infrastructure, to engage successfully with the eWorld. However, they hoped that by working together as a network of small states they could create a collective capacity for online learning and harness the eWorld for the benefit of their peoples. They called this network the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) and asked COL to help them.

### *What is the VUSSC?*

So what is this Virtual University and what is it for? The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is neither fully virtual, nor a university in the sense of being a degree-awarding body. It is a collaborative network of the small states of the Commonwealth.

Its first aim is to expand tertiary education in these small states – both face-to-face offerings and distance learning. Unlike Lesotho, most of the small states do not have their own universities but nearly all of them have small tertiary colleges. Some states, such as Seychelles, Maldives and St. Lucia are developing these into national universities. Others such as St. Vincent and the Grenadines have merged their colleges to create a multi-purpose national institution with greater critical mass.

The second aim is to enable the small states to be players in the world of online learning. Bridging the digital divide is a key objective.

### *When did the VUSSC develop?*

The idea of the VUSSC was hatched at 14CCEM, the Education Ministers conference in 2000, and COL then helped a smaller group of Ministers develop a formal proposal. This was approved at 15CCEM in Edinburgh in 2003 and COL was asked to continue facilitating the project. Since then the VUSSC has

developed steadily and has created a snowball effect – even though few of the small states ever experience snow. All 32 small states are now involved.

The most visible milestones in its progress, which have done much to generate a sense of excitement and momentum around the VUSSC, have been the eight course, development workshops, or boot camps. Each has been hosted by one of the small states, in order: Mauritius, Singapore, Trinidad & Tobago, and Samoa, which has hosted two, Seychelles, Bahamas and Maldives. We are delighted to be in Lesotho for this ninth workshop.

There were two other significant developments in 2008.

First, working with the South African Qualifications Authority VUUSC members developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework to facilitate movement of courses and programmes between states. Establishing the credibility of VUSSC offerings is particularly important since a number of the small states, whether deservedly or not, have a reputation for being safe havens for the operations of degree mills and bogus institutions.

Second, in November of that year the University of the West Indies offered the first fully online course under the VUSSC banner, with students enrolling from many countries in the network.

The next major milestone was the launch of a VUSSC portal giving details of the courses that accredited institutions in the small states are offering internationally. This is steadily growing and is an invaluable resource for all of you

*Where does the money come from?*

Where does the money for VUSSC developments come from?

The proposal for VUSSC that the Ministers approved in 2003 called for the expenditure of some \$20 million over the first five years. However, no donors stepped forward to fund the infrastructure costs of the VUSSC, so rather than being developed as a donor project from the top down it has been built from the bottom up as a bootstrap operation. I think that has been a very good thing.

However, funds for some operating costs have been forthcoming. Given the importance of small states to the Commonwealth the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation has given a multi-year grant.

Because of the VUSSC's commitment to developing courseware as open educational resources the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has supported some of the course development workshops, as has the Government of Singapore.

COL has integrated support of the VUSSC into its programme, giving you the support first of Paul West and now of John Lesperance. Finally, your countries have invested significantly in the salary costs of those who have attended VUSSC events.

*How is the VUSSC managed?*

How is the VUSSC managed? VUSSC is not a COL project but an initiative of the small states themselves. In 2008 the states took over the management of the VUSSC through the creation of a formal Management Committee, which is chaired by Dr Emma Kruse Vaai of Samoa.

There is also another group, working with the Management Committee, to oversee the implementation of the Transnational Qualifications Framework.

*What about the boot camps?*

These boot camps are a vital part of VUSSC but I don't need to say more about them since you are living the experience. Each brings together subject experts from up to 20 states for a period of three weeks. They are given the training necessary to develop eLearning materials through online collaboration and begin the development of eLearning materials in the subject area. This course development work continues, through online collaboration, once the participants go home.

An important duty for the participants is to share the skills they learned with at least five colleagues when they get home by training them in the work of online collaboration and eLearning development. Nearly 200 people have attended VUSSC boot camps and shared their skills, so there are now hundreds more academics and officials in the small states with advanced IT and eLearning skills.

*How does the VUSSC develop Open Educational Resources?*

The VUSSC materials are prepared in the form of Open Educational Resources (OERs). This means that they can be taken, adapted and used by any academic or institution anywhere the world, not just those in the small states. This also makes you part of an important worldwide movement that was initiated by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and developed further by the UK Open University. VUSSC is the world's most multi-national open educational resource project and you should be proud to be the architects of it.

## Conclusion

I hope that my short account of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth has shown you how hundreds of educators and officials from 32 countries have successfully implemented of the vision that their Ministers of Education conceived a decade ago. The ministers wanted their countries to become equal players in the eWorld and you are achieving that. The initiative has now achieved lift off and I believe that it will contribute substantially to the development of tertiary education in the small states of the Commonwealth in the years to come.

We are pleased that this is part of COL's wider collaboration with UNESCO in assisting the small states, but let me remind you once again that this is your project not COL's project.

COL will accompany you on the journey and be as helpful as it can, but you are the people who must ensure that the VUSSC contributes powerfully to the development of tertiary education in your countries.

I wish you a most productive workshop, I repeat my thanks to our Lesotho hosts, and I invite you to enjoy their hospitality and to play hard as well as working hard.