

Building Bridges between Educators in Small and Island States



Building Bridges between Educators in Small and Island States, Commonwealth of Learning, Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

Fourth International Training and Course Development Workshop, Apia, Samoa, 12 November 2007

Opening Remarks, Paul West and Sir John Daniel

Welcome and Introduction

Honourable Minister of Education, To'omata Alapati To'omata,
Vice Chancellor and President Magele Mauilui Magele,
Staff, learners, ladies and gentlemen;

It is a great pleasure to greet you and to welcome you to this training and course development workshop, affectionately known as a "Boot Camp", for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

Participants of this workshop are joining a growing number of professional educators in Commonwealth Small and Island States who have received experiential training in using ICTs to collaborate and develop course materials. These VUSSC activities are helping to reduce the distances between educators, making you closer to colleagues, even though you might be separated by thousands of kilometres.

This is the fourth of these events; previous workshops have been held in Mauritius, Singapore, and Trinidad & Tobago. Your team leaders visited Vancouver a month ago for an intensive few days of preparation and will now help you get started over the next day or so. While you are here and when you return home in a few weeks, I invite you to make contact with colleagues who have participated in previous workshops. It is important that 'VUSSC workshop alumni' in each of your countries now begin to collaborate and train more colleagues. These workshops will come to an end in a few years and your Ministries of Education expect that you and your institutions will have built the expertise needed to continue this process without external intervention.

You come from 13 countries - from the Pacific and Indian Oceans, Africa and the Caribbean - to this, our first VUSSC course development workshop in the Pacific.

Small States are Special

You all come from the small states that make up two-thirds of the 53 member countries of the Commonwealth. Some small states are islands in the sea, like Samoa, while others are 'islands' in large continents, like Lesotho. This means that the Commonwealth intergovernmental organisations, that is to say the Commonwealth of Learning, the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth Secretariat, must pay special attention to these states; and that is why this boot camp is partly financed by the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation. I would like to thank the Ministry of Education of Samoa for their support for this workshop and for all VUSSC member countries who have sent participants. We are especially grateful to the National University of Samoa for contributing so much time and effort to making this workshop a success.

Origins of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth Ministers of Education meet every three years. The idea of the VUSSC emerged when they met in Canada in 2000. Two special features of that Millennium Year influenced their discussions.

First, there was a strong focus on development in 2000. Meeting at the United Nations, Heads of Government approved a Millennium Declaration with eight Millennium Development Goals. Earlier that year the World Forum on Education for All had convened in Dakar, Senegal.

Second, in 2000, industrialised countries were being carried away by the dotcom frenzy. The Internet began transforming communication between people and created new ways of doing business. Online communication seemed to have the potential for transforming education as well. Enthusiasts told us that older educational methods would soon be history and that all true learning would take place in front of a computer screen.

These two developments concerned the Education Ministers when they met in Canada at the end of 2000. On the one hand the Dakar and Millennium Goals increased their determination to increase access to education at all levels. On the other hand, new information and communication technology was both a threat and an opportunity.

The Ministers from the Small States shared a common anxiety that their countries did not have the critical mass, either of expertise or of equipment, to engage with online learning in a self-sufficient manner. But they did not want to be dependent yet again, as so often in the past, on the technologies, systems and materials developed by the larger states.

They believed that by working together they might be able to nurture an autonomous capacity for online learning that would enable them to harness these new ICT developments for the benefit of their people. They called this collaborative mechanism the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth and asked COL to create a formal proposal. COL did so and a plan for the VUSSC was approved when the Ministers met again three years later in Scotland.

We started building VUSSC from the bottom up rather than from the top down. We did not create a top-heavy management structure as one might for an institution. Rather, we wrote to the Minister of Education of each Small State asking three questions: do you still want to do this; what do you want to achieve for your country through the VUSSC; and who is your contact person?

Over 20 small states still wanted to participate. Today that figure has climbed to 30, which is over 90% of the Commonwealth small states. The statements of priorities agreed by your Interlocutors included the subject areas countries are now working on, including Disaster Management.

So let me emphasise strongly, that the VUSSC is an initiative of your Ministers of Education to promote the development of education and training in your countries. This is your project and you are here to make it happen. We at COL are here to facilitate the process, but the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is you and your institutions. It is not COL.

Open Educational Resources, Wikis and Web2

So how will the VUSSC work? What are you going to do here? Why do we say that it is unique?

Despite its name the VUSSC is not a new institution in the conventional sense. It is a collaborative network with multiple points of activity. We are not creating a new tertiary institution, but trying to reinforce the tertiary institutions your countries already have. All the Ministers want the VUSSC to strengthen their existing tertiary institutions.

During the course of this 3-week period you will gain real experience of ICTs in education. Moreover, you will see important leading edge practices as you develop open educational resources using online technologies. Nowhere in the world are so many countries' institutions formally collaborating through ICTs in this way.

Thanks partly to the VUSSC, the trend to open educational resources is gaining momentum. Open educational resources (OERs) are your vehicle for collaboration. The open educational resources you will create here in Samoa, and those you will continue to develop when you return home, will translate the vision of your Ministers in 2000 into reality.

Priorities for When You Get Home

We want to suggest some priorities for when you get home. These are that you focus on both process and product goals. This workshop is not an end in itself; it is the start of a new era. It is important that you stay 'with the programme'.

It is imperative that when you get home you continue to work on the VUSSC, and train and involve other colleagues. The success of the VUSSC in any particular country will depend on the skills, energy and teamwork of those involved - You. We have repeatedly reminded Ministers that time for working on the VUSSC must be written into the job descriptions of those involved. Please discuss this with your line managers to ensure that it happens.

It is important that when you get home, you share the skills you have acquired here. Teach them to others so that ministries and institutions in your country have a steadily expanding pool of people who are comfortable working online, and know how to create open educational resources.

As far as product goes, there are two imperatives. The first is to complete a set of usable OERs in disaster management by the time you leave Samoa. When you return home, your next task is to ensure that the course material receives appropriate accreditation at your institutions and is offered in courses to benefit the people of your country. The course you create here needs to be approved as part of your institution's programme.

A Transnational Qualifications Framework

Finally, there is the challenging areas of qualifications frameworks and the recognition of each other's qualifications. In a separate set of activities, we are working with your Ministries of Education to create a qualifications framework and set of exemplars that can help countries fast-track the implementation of a national qualifications framework and support the work of regional qualifications authorities. Officials from your countries will be invited to meet next year to agree a process to facilitate the future transfer of courses and qualifications between countries.

In Conclusion

You are all people in senior positions who appreciate the importance of VUSSC or you would not be spending this amount of time away from home for it. We ask you to ensure, when you get back home, that you communicate its importance to your colleagues and pass on the experience you gain here in Samoa.

You have the possibility, through this new network called the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, of putting small states in the forefront of educational developments in the 21st century.

We wish you success with this task.

Paul West & Sir John Daniel