Abstract

Determined not to be left behind in the race to incorporate eLearning into education and training, the Ministers of Education of the small states that constitute two-thirds of Commonwealth membership conceived the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. It is a mechanism for working together to develop materials in electronic formats that can be adapted and used by tertiary institutions in each of the 30 participating countries. Course content in Tourism & Hospitality; Entrepreneurship; Teacher Professional Development; ICTs (The COL/UNESCO Computer Navigator's Certificate); Life Skills and Disaster Management is now being developed collaboratively using "web2" technologies.

The success of the initiative will depend on creating a transnational qualifications framework to provide a common language for credits and awards arising from the materials. The South African Qualifications Authority is helping COL to analyse and merge the information on available qualification frameworks in the small states of the Commonwealth. Documents on national qualifications frameworks from each country will be used to prepare a draft Transnational Qualifications Framework for presentation to officials in 2008. They will use the document as a starting point to agree on processes and procedures for the transfer of qualifications.
**Introduction**

Ladies and gentlemen, the Commonwealth of Learning is delighted to have the opportunity to join you in this workshop. COL admires greatly the work of the Southern African Development Community and the South African Qualifications Authority.

While this presentation focuses on the work of the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth or "VUSSC" as we know it, I will begin by making a few general statements to set the scene and then focus more on our ambitions with the VUSSC.

**Achieving Access with Quality**

National education systems need to develop in ways that can serve their populations best in terms of quantity and quality. This raises a key question: "what is quality and who says so?" Is it possible to take a common approach to quality assurance in education across a number of rather different countries?

Our simple response to the question, "what is quality", is fitness for purpose at minimum cost to society. This definition is clear and flexible enough to fit different national realities.

National quality assurance bodies have fuller definitions of quality education programmes. For example, India's National Assessment and Accreditation Council or "NAAC", sets these goals:

- contribution to national development,
- fostering global competencies among students,
- inculcating a value system in students,
- promoting the use of technology, and
- the quest for excellence.

NAAC has set an admirable target by starting at such a high-level. Although working to meet the needs of a country, they are setting their sights on the international stage with high standards and values.

Quality is an increasing preoccupation for all governments. In a recent study, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) found the following national approaches to quality assurance within SADC (Southern African Development Community):

- Quality assurance is a priority for implementation in most countries,
- Governments want improved quality assurance across countries and sectors, and
- The SADC member states are all engaged in some form of national qualifications framework development.

SAQA also found that:
• Quality assurance terminology is inconsistent between countries,
• Guidelines for quality assurance are limited,
• Countries with national qualifications frameworks appear to be the most active in this area, and
• The evaluation of qualifications and their comparability is of concern across member states.

There seems to be wide agreement on the need for quality assurance systems and criteria. SAQA, based on findings of a study they performed, goes on to describe the key principles that must underpin a proposed framework to be:

• An approach that supports national and regional initiatives and priorities, and enables actions to take place simultaneously, so that they can draw on each other,
• A long-term approach is needed; in place of quick fixes, one should focus on "simplicity", "incrementalism", and "local involvement".
• Progress will be achieved through targeted actions and funding.

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

People in small island states often say that tourists come to visit them and say that their countries are like 'paradise on earth', but when the tourists leave, the island remains home to those who live there. These small states, some in continents like Africa and some tiny islands in very large oceans, are home to many people who have as much of a stake in economic development, and the 21st century as anyone living in a highly industrialised country. The Virtual University is a linking structure, established by Ministers of Education to help build human capacity and strengthen their countries.

If the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth is to succeed in supporting the sharing of courses and movement of qualified people, it will need to have in place, a mechanism that enables countries to make valid comparisons. This needs to take place in a world where transnational education and the mobility of populations have become the norm. What is also rapidly becoming a norm is the sharing of course materials, a principle on which the VUSSC was established.

UNESCO first introduced the concept of sharing course materials as "open educational resources". It then received more attention when the Hewlett Foundation provided financial support to MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and others to prepare and publish all their classroom notes on the Internet. The Open University of the UK has launched a website called OpenLearn, which focuses on the sharing of materials designed for distance education. VUSSC is taking a similar approach to sharing by encouraging the small states to share all the content that is developed by the groups of professional educators being formed.

When creating course materials, the VUSSC teams need to ensure that they understand the target audiences, the national needs of more than 2-dozen countries and develop content at an appropriate level.
Each team of professionals is started off with a 2½-week International Training and Materials Development Workshop, sometimes called a "boot camp". These training workshops bring together teams from across the Commonwealth's small states, to immerse them in ICTs that they can use practically in their professional lives. They learn not only about ICTs, but also about each other's countries and the different cultures. They learn about team-work across international borders and at great distances. When they return home, they have, what Professor Senteni of Mauritius said, created a new Diaspora from scratch, a group of people that will continue to be an international support group in the future and possibly for the rest of their lives.

Drafts need to be turned into course materials, which in turn, need to be turned into courses, and courses need to be recognised. To accomplish this we are working with institutions to complete the materials that the groups have started, and have them formally accredited in at least one country. When institutions accredit courses, it would be ideal if this accreditation was as valid in a country 1,000km or 10,000km away, as in the home country and institution. For this, we need a qualifications framework and quality assurance mechanisms that will work across international borders and great distances, and co-operate with regional qualifications bodies - a Transnational Qualifications Framework.

A Transnational Qualifications Framework

We face the challenge of matching desired outcomes in multiple countries. We may believe that basic accounting in one country should be the same in the next country, but is it? When country A publishes what it deems to be an appropriate set of standards, and country B believes this does not fit the bill, who arbitrates the difference of opinion. Having an agreed arbitration process in place ahead of time, seems like a sensible thing to do.

Where different countries establish different systems, for example, one country decides on 6 levels of qualifications and another decides on 8 levels, how does one reconcile the differences? Once again, better we speak to each other early on in the process and keep speaking rather than leaving it until positions become entrenched.

Traditionally, governments would take on this role. It does this in a partnership with the industries that will employ the learners that emerge from these systems. Institutions, especially universities have been known to defend their right to autonomy; that no one should question their right to assess their own quality. Universities are beginning to evolve their thinking in this area too - some understand that their learners end up in private sector and that they need to listen to their clients - or risk having the private sector open their own specialised institutions. This has been quite prevalent in the computer industry, which is notoriously fast moving.

Universities and other institutions do need to be full partners in the qualifications framework and quality assurance processes. They are the providers of the nation's next generation of creators, business people and politicians.

The more recent group of people expecting to have a stake is the general public; that a member of the public who uploads a video to YouTube, who maintains a blog on her daily activities and who sees
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herself as a competent maintainer of a dozen encyclopaedia pages on WikiPedia - should also be able to help set the standard. There is a view that the standards should be posted on a wiki site and left to anyone to update, much like a WikiPedia article; that these will find a standard through general consensus, and that the daily changes to the standards simply reflect the natural daily changes in the world.

This high-flying title is the VUSSC equivalent of a regional qualifications framework. Whereas a regional framework would try to address the interests of a particular region's culture, languages and issues, the TQF will try to address the idiosyncrasies of small and island states. It will act in collaboration with regional authorities and help to stimulate networking between regions, in support of the countries with the smallest economies and populations on earth.

The first task for VUSSC has been to engage the expert help of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). With SAQA’s help, information on existing, draft and planned qualifications frameworks are being assembled and analysed. These will be compared to other available frameworks and a draft framework will be produced.

In the first half of 2008, a meeting will be called of senior government officials of the VUSSC member countries, now numbering 30, to consider it as a starting point. The officials will be asked to address how they can continue to update the framework with input from their own countries.

Exemplars and guidelines on the establishment and running of national qualifications authorities will be shared and where possible expertise provided to a regional level, to help build national capacity of national authorities.

Online means will be explored on how national and regional qualifications authorities will be able to collaborate to continue to build and share human capacity to strengthen the island and small state paradises around the world.

Sharing Content

To share content, the materials need to indicate clearly that this may be done. A book marked 'Copyright, All rights Reserved' is not a truly sharable item since one cannot legally duplicate it and in many cases, one cannot even translate it into another language, not even Braille. To help countries identify legal ways to reduce the payment of copyright royalties, COL worked with a team of experts to produce a copyright guideline document for Ministries of Education, which can be downloaded from our website. This seemed to strike a chord, so a second document was produced, this time an audit or questionnaire guideline, aimed at helping Ministries identify potential ways to save money.

COL supports the sharing of learning content. Learning materials created by VUSSC teams will be published on COL’s website for anyone to use. Some of these are 'free content' while some will only be 'free of charge'. It is anomalies like this that are adding to the confusion and I’ll briefly touch on these, and refer you to our brief guideline document, also available on our website for more information.

Materials that are described as 'free content' are free in all respects. You may take them from where they are, alter and duplicate them as you wish and sell them. You are at liberty to charge for your
organisation's costs in customisation, duplication, including the costs of salaries and overheads. You may also make a profit from using the materials over and above your costs, without recourse to the original holder of the intellectual property. That is because the privilege to do this has already been granted in the copyright license noted on the materials. One of the well-known licenses for this is the "CreativeCommons-attribution-share alike" license (or "CC-BY-SA" license), which requires the user to give attribution to the originating author and to share the newly created materials with others in the way they were received. Giving content away for any purposes as I have just outlined is laudable and helps others to run profitable businesses. Examples of this are projects like the contents of COL's WikiEducator and Canonical's Ubuntu Linux. Learning content and computer programs from sources like this support both the non-profit and the for-profit sectors, which in turn support national objectives in a unitary education system.

There are any number of reasons why organisations may not have the freedom to provide their learning materials as 'free content', but would still like to share what they can, as content that is 'free of charge'. In this case, the organisation might use a license such as the Creative Commons "NC" or "non-commercial" copyright license, which permits the user of the materials to recover costs such as student registration fees, duplication costs, salaries and overhead expenses, but without having a profit motive. Much of the education world runs on a break-even or non-profit basis and so this license, which permits the exchange of money, but limits the profit motive, is sometimes found an acceptable alternative. Both US-based MIT and the UK's Open University use this model.

Should users want to mix the contents of these two kinds of licenses, each section of the materials needs to be clearly annotated for future users, so that they can once again make informed decisions. Being informed on the options, understanding how the major licenses affect the materials' usage and being able to handle the difference in the assembly of the desired finished material, is now more important than ever. You can avoid using certain kinds of material by choice, or use them to your benefit, if you understand the implications of each license and how to work with them.

Another interesting option is the 'ND' or 'no derivatives' option, which means that users cannot (legally) make any changes to the document. "Ridiculous" you might say, "why bother to share the content then?" Consider a document containing the learning outcomes for a course that you want to share. The document needs to be freely shared so that everybody can use it, but change one word and it's no longer the same standards document that was issued by the relevant authority. You can always create a new document to suit another purpose though.

Bill Packard said in 1997: "Marketing is too important to leave to the marketing department" . Well, I can assure you today that copyright is now too important to leave only to a librarian; it is everyone's responsibility to understand their rights, and others' rights too. And the librarian will no doubt still be an essential person in building institutional understanding in this area!
In Conclusion

Who decides? We believe the governments of the Small States of the Commonwealth need to make decisions about their future, and decide who decides. It will be neither a free-for-all, nor will it be a closed-shop run by Universities and Ministries.

Will there be one new way to do things in the future or one new way to offer education? We believe there have been many methods and technologies up to now and that new methods do not simply replace old ones, they enhance and add new possibilities.

Can the Small States of the Commonwealth further develop their own educational systems or should they focus on receiving transnational education from other countries? We believe transnational education will always have a place, but that the majority of education in Small States will be carried out by the Small States; that Small States can be providers and not only consumers of education.

We believe in the need for education to reach everyone, with or without computers or bandwidth, classrooms and if not available, even teachers.

Thank you.