

# *The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth: Origins and Purpose*

---



*International Conference on Open and Online Learning, Penang, Malaysia, 14 June 2007*

*The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth: Origins and Purpose*

*Sir John Daniel*

## **Introduction**

I am most grateful to Professor Alain Senteni for scheduling this plenary on the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. On Tuesday I talked in general terms about the role of Open Educational Resources in taking forward the access agenda. Today we are closer to your own preoccupations. Some of our colleagues from the University of Mauritius, who did a wonderful job at the first VUUSC course development event (we call them boot camps), will talk about how a curriculum can be built from the bottom up, as a set of negotiated collaborative contents.

They will demonstrate the potential of so-called social computing and collaborative approaches, and to introduce the Open Participatory Learning Infrastructure as the new phase in OER development.

My role is briefly to set the stage by recalling the origins and purposes of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

First, I shall explain why the Commonwealth is so interested in small states.

Second, I shall recall how the Ministers of Education had the vision of the VUUSC.

Third, I shall update you on the story so far from an organisational perspective.

## **Why this Interest in Small States?**

The interest in small states reflects the fact that they constitute a majority of Commonwealth members, 32 out of 53 countries.

Small, refers either to population or to geographical size - or to both. Most of the small states of the Commonwealth are small islands with small populations located in the Caribbean, in the Pacific and in the Indian Ocean. But there are also landlocked states with small populations such as Lesotho, Swaziland

and Botswana - although Botswana is not small geographically. There are also coastal states with small populations such as The Gambia and Belize, which are geographically small, and Guyana and Namibia, which are rather large.

Despite their diversity small states face common challenges.

The first is simply being small. A small territory means that natural resources are limited in quantity and variety. A small population makes it difficult for a country to have skilled and qualified people in all the many occupations and trades that underpin a modern economy.

Then there is the tyranny of transport. Small landlocked states face difficulty and expense in getting their traded goods to and from ports in neighbouring countries. Island states face the challenges of distance from markets and the cost of sea and air links.

Lately we have become more sensitive to the special environmental challenges that affect small states. They are both particularly prone to natural calamities and are especially vulnerable to their effects. Some of them, such as Tuvalu, are in the front line of climate change because rising sea levels threaten the very existence of the country.

Small states have become increasingly conscious of their common needs and are asking international bodies to formulate programmes to address them. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is one such programme. How did it come about?

## Why the VUSSC and What is it?

The Commonwealth Ministers of Education meet every three years. The idea of the VUSSC emerged when they met in Halifax, Nova Scotia, 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 convened in Dakar.

Second, and in sharp contrast to this concern for the world's poorer people, in 2000 the rich world was carried away by the dotcom frenzy. The Internet began transforming communication between people and creating new ways of doing business. Online communication seemed to have 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 rattled the Education Ministers when they met in Halifax 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 peoples. They called this collaborative mechanism the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth and asked COL work up a formal proposal.

COL did so and a plan for the VUSSC was approved when the Ministers met again three years later in Edinburgh. This plan was on my desk when I joined COL in 2004. I reviewed it, talked to people and reached two conclusions.

First, the atmosphere of panic generated by the dotcom frenzy in 2000 had subsided. As often happens when new phenomena appear, we overestimate the short-term impact but underestimate the long-term consequences. By 2004 online learning had not dumped previous educational methods in the trashcan of history. However, it was seeping gradually into education and training at all levels.

Second, the plan for the VUSSC seemed to call for the creation and funding of a new institution with its own headquarters, organisation and infrastructure. I found that donors were not interested in funding any new international body, although they were keen to facilitate initiatives in education and training that might result from the VUSSC, especially if they were linked to agreed development objectives.

So we flipped the VUSSC over and started building it from the bottom up rather than from the top down. I wrote to the Minister of Education of each Small State asking two questions: are you still a player; and what do you want to achieve for your country through the VUSSC?

Over 20 small states still wanted to participate. Today that figure has climbed to 28, which is 90% of the small states. The statements of priorities included the subjects countries are now working on, including Life Skills.

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

So the VUSSC is a mechanism to help small states work together to produce, adapt and use courses and learning materials that would be difficult for any one country to produce alone. That is the product goal. But the Ministers also had a process goal.

They see the VUSSC as a special opportunity to develop expertise in online learning, eLearning and ICTs generally, even though some courses may well be delivered through traditional multi-media in some countries given their limited infrastructure.

## Where has the VUSSC got to?

So where have we got to?

We have held three planning meetings, two in Singapore and one in Jamaica and we are into our third boot camp right now. The first boot camp, which our colleagues from Mauritius will talk about, was held there last August and focused on learning materials in the areas of Tourism, Hospitality and Entrepreneurship. The second, in Singapore in March, began work on materials for the professional development of teachers. The third is being held, as I speak, in Trinidad and Tobago and focuses on Life Skills.

The boot camps are the key processes for getting the VUSSC rolling and I look forward to hearing my colleagues' experience of them.

Let me just mention some other planning work that is starting. A 28-country project like this gets us into the challenging areas of qualifications frameworks and qualifications recognition in what it called cross-border education. Nothing quite like this has been done before, with a core course being prepared for offering in more than twenty countries.

However, much work over many years has prepared the ground, notably UNESCO's Global and Regional Frameworks for Quality Assurance and the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education. From VUSSC's perspective UNESCO has created the top level treaties that are politically necessary. But COL is also working in a shorter-term perspective to create a master qualifications framework for the VUSSC. For that we are working with the South African Qualifications Authority, which has an impressive track record in this area.

The aim, as I stressed on Tuesday, is to ensure that all these OERs find their way smoothly into recognised courses that students in the various countries can take. The VUSSC will fail if it is seen simply as a vehicle for the collaborative preparation of courses and materials. It must be seen as a network that unites and strengthens the institutions in the small states by enabling them to operate on a larger canvas.

The Ministers wanted their countries to acquire the skills and knowledge to operate confidently in the eWorld, but they did not intend that they should have to invent every wheel and design all the courses from scratch. With the skills acquired they will be able to review and assess the rapidly growing body of OERs out there in the world and see if some of them are relevant to their countries' needs.

As I hand over to my Mauritian colleagues, let me stress once again that despite its name the VUSSC is not a new institution. It is a collaborative network with multiple points of activity. We are not creating a new organisation but trying to reinforce the institutions the countries already have.