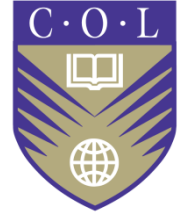


Capacity Building: The Road to Resilience



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Introduction

The purpose of my presentation is to give you an overview of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth or VUSSC and the activities it is undertaking to address the issue of capacity building to overcome some of the challenges that the small states of the Commonwealth are facing.

At the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting which was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka in November 2013, the Heads of Government debated on four possible areas, each underpinned by ongoing Commonwealth work, where leaders could make a contribution that can potentially shapes and transform the intergovernmental debates.

These are resilience, youth employment, climate change and finance for development.

Building Resilience

Heightened exposure to events outside the small states control put the progress of small states at risk. At the core of their development concerns is the need to build resilience to shocks, since dealing with effects of shocks is a significant drain on national resources and institutions, building resilience thus requires:

- a stable macro economy;
- a well-functioning and efficient markets;
- strong institutions and governance;
- social cohesion; and
- good environmental management.

If the small states are to address the issues of resilience they will need international support to access resources on favourable terms to fund critical infrastructure projects and fill capacity gaps. The Virtual

University for Small States of the Commonwealth has been addressing the issue of capacity building since 2006 and contributing towards achieving resilience in small states.

In literatures published by the American Psychological Association illustrated factors associated with resilience. These are:

- The capacity to make realistic plans and take steps to carry them out.
- Having a positive view and confidence regarding ones strengths and abilities.
- Skills in communication and problem solving.
- The capacity to manage feelings and impulses.

What is resilience?

Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. It means "bouncing back" from difficult experiences.

Research has shown that resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary. People commonly demonstrate resilience.

Small State Challenges

A small state generally faces unique difficulties and natural resources are limited in quantity and variety.

- A small population makes it difficult for a country to have enough skilled and qualified people in all the many occupations and trades that underpin a modern economy.
- The ‘tyranny of transport’ that impedes trade to and from ports in neighbouring countries. Island states face the challenges of distance from markets and the cost of sea and air links.
- Special environmental challenges including vulnerability to natural disasters such as hurricanes, tsunamis, floods, and rising sea levels.

Why a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth?

What is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth doing to address the issue of resilience? It is important for us to understand why and how it was created. So why a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth? It is not an innovation of university management but an initiative of the Ministers of Education of the Commonwealth from the small states. When they held their triennial conference in Canada in 2000 they faced two challenges.

The UN's Millennium Declaration and the Dakar World Forum on Education for All had emphasised on the imperative of expanding access to education at all levels. The world was concerned by the dotcom

frenzy as the Internet began to introduce radical changes to business and communication. Online communication seemed to have the potential to transform education thus the claim that traditional educational methods would soon be history. Some well know figures were advocating that that all true learning would take place online. The ministers from the small states were determined that their countries should engage with the online world but were not sure that they had the critical mass, of either expertise or equipment, to engage effectively with virtual learning as individual countries. However, they did not want to remain dependent on larger states, as so often in the past this has been the case with regard to technologies, systems and learning materials. They believed 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.

In 2003, a ministerial working group lead by the Seychelles Minister of Education who is now the Vice President, Honourable Danny Faure, held their meeting in the Seychelles and the concept of a Virtual University as a network was approved by Ministers later that year and the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) was asked to help countries collaborate and strengthen the capacity of national education institutions.

VUSSC is a totally new concept, unlike conventional tertiary level institutions which are made from bricks and mortar or for that matter virtual universities, it is rather different from any existing university concept.

So, what is it?

So what is this Virtual University and what is it for? It has been said that the Holy Roman Empire was neither holy nor an empire. Similarly 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. The ministers called it the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC). It is a network of small states and educational institutions.

Its purpose is to expand tertiary education in these countries - both face-to-face offerings and open and distance learning. Most of the small states do not have their own universities, although many have small campuses of the two major regional universities, the University of the South Pacific and the University of the West Indies. However, nearly all of them have small tertiary colleges. Some states, such as St. Lucia and Seychelles, have developed these into national universities; others, such as St. Vincent and the Grenadines, have merged them to create a multi-purpose national institution with greater critical mass.

VUSSC is therefore committed to the building of human capacity in the small states of the Commonwealth. The collaborative efforts of educators from participating countries results in the development of open content resources for education, training and capacity building, and the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) to broaden access to education. In the process it has developed a Transnational Framework of Qualifications (TQF).

One of the great Heads of State of our times, Nelson Mandela, said, 'Education is the most powerful weapon, which you can use to change the world'.

Training Workshops

VUSSC builds human capacity in online materials development among educators in small states of the Commonwealth by hosting intensive training workshops or "boot camps." International training workshops have taken place in nine countries to date, with participants from a total of 30 countries. Workshop participants are educational professionals and have had the VUSSC activity included in their annual work plan.

In the VUSSC workshops, educators from small states:

- Learn computer literacy skills including software, education technology and collaboration tools.
- Develop Open Educational Resources, that is learning materials that is shared free of charge.

The workshops are designed to achieve the following set of outcomes:

- 1 Learn to work collaboratively in online environments: Using a range of technologies in education such as word processor, Web 2.0 technologies (online collaboration), presentation and receive training on Learning Management Systems (such as Moodle, ATutor and MOOCs).
- 2 Create a set of "finished" materials: Using the COL Instructional Design Template and an online collaborative platform called "BaseCamp" course modules have been produced and published on VUSSC and COL's websites for anyone to use under a Creative Commons license.
- 3 Finally, accreditation is occurring when institutions adopt the materials into their curriculum.

To date, more than 21,000 people have been trained through VUSSC activities since 2006. Nine institutions in 8 small states are offering VUSSC developed courses and programmes including certificate in Sustainable Tourism, Disaster Management, Environmental Science, Business and Entrepreneurship, education and in partnership with the Commonwealth the online course on International Architecture for Environment & Sustainable Development. VUSSC is expanding the number of learners it is reaching by collaborating with regional and international organisations. In a recent workshop held in Barbados, 16 institutions have committed to offer the Associate Degree in Tourism and Hospitality using face-to-face and soon online.

When somebody participates in a VUSSC workshop, the person is encouraged, when returning home, to continue collaborate with other participants and to share their skills with colleagues in their home country. More than 30 small states have participated in VUSSC activities.

Poverty Alleviation

VUSSC operates in a range of low- to middle-income countries, providing practical skills. Economic and social development depends on the creation, dissemination and application of knowledge by everyone. Open and distance learning course materials developed by VUSSC aims to enrich the curriculum of all schools and universities, thereby enabling students to improve their livelihoods.