The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC): Using Technology to Increase Access to Learning Opportunities in Small States

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Abstract

When VUSSC started, its main priority was the development of skills in areas of need in the Commonwealth small states. Capacity development was limited to the education systems in most of the participating countries, and thus the need to build it up systematically. Historically, there has been a strong focus on using one-off professional development workshops as a primary strategy for developing this capacity. However, these workshops by themselves, one-off, professional development workshops tend to be of little educational value that can be very expansive.

Today the VUSSC has expanded its network and more countries are now participating in it. It has developed its first degree programme and emphasising more on technology. It has played a major role in building capacity in ICT and institutions have been empowered to deliver eLearning using a combination of technologies.

The VUSSC proposal that was presented to Ministers in 2003 (COL, 2003) contained the following statement:

'The vision that emerged for a virtual university serving small states was one of a consortium of institutions, enabled by appropriate ICT applications, working together in practical ways to plan programmes, develop the required content and ensure the delivery of those programmes and support services to learners.'

It has also created a Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF), the first of its kind that has helped to establish an accreditation mechanism for the small states thus enabling greater access to quality learning opportunities and mobility of learners within the small states.

What is VUSSC?

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth initiative as undertaken by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is a new model. It is an approach that combines the effort of ministries of education and institutions of learning to address two challenges that Ministers of Education had when they met at their triennial conference in Canada in 2000. VUSSC is not just an innovation in itself but an initiative of the Ministers of Education of the Commonwealth small states.

One of their concerns was that the UN's Millennium Declaration and the Dakar World Forum on Education for All that highlighted the need to expand 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.

The ministers were very concerned but determined that their countries should engage with the online world but doubted that they had the critical mass, in terms of expertise and equipment, to engage effectively with virtual learning as individual countries. However, they did not want to be left behind, as so often in the past, to the technologies, systems and materials developed by the larger states. 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.

They called this network the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC). The name is a misnomer because it is neither fully virtual, nor a university in the sense of being a brick and mortar institution. It has evolved as a collaborative network of the small states of the Commonwealth.

In addressing these challenges, it was decided that the way forward is for VUSSC to expand tertiary education in these countries. This is to include both face-to-face offerings and open and distance learning. A good number of these small states do not have their own universities, although many have small campuses of the two major regional universities, namely, the University of the South Pacific and the University of the West Indies. However, nearly all of them have small post-secondary institutions. It was also decided that the small states should be key players in the world of online learning thus eliminating the problem of the digital divide.

Thus the VUSSC is working to strengthen tertiary education in small states as a network of Ministries of Education and public institutions. It focuses on the development of human resources, the creation and offering of new courses, and the establishment of a transnational accreditation mechanism. Participating countries, comprising land-locked, coastal and island states, all face issues of isolation and brain drain, and are susceptible to the various impacts of climate change.

Through the VUSSC, COL has provided a new model of collaboration to governments. The model is based on action learning that enables the methodology to be changed as lessons are learned. The tangible

benefits to the VUSSC member countries are: content in various areas that can be adapted and accessed locally; an expanded reservoir of local capability provided by ongoing training from workshop participants; local educators who have become more competent in the use of ICTs in education; students that are empowered through additional open and distance course offerings; and increased access to education through free content.

Using ICT to Drive the VUSSC

COL came up with a strategy to get small states to volunteer to hold face-to-face course development and training workshops often known as "boot camp", attended by educators from all interested countries. Educators were trained in writing distance learning materials using online collaboration platforms in intensive face-to-face settings lasting up to three weeks. When the people trained in the workshops returned home they continued to collaborate online to develop courses. Furthermore, they had a multiplier effect because they were required to share their new skills and knowledge with other colleagues in their home institutions.

In August 2006 COL hosted its first training and materials development workshop in Mauritius for educators from 14 Commonwealth small states. Over a three-week period, participants developed online skills to enable them collaboratively develop learning content for courses in Tour Guiding and Small Business.

The VUSSC workshop that was held in Mauritius was so successful that it led to other similar workshops. Each workshop had a focus on content development including capacity development. The aim was to provide learners with a wide variety of educational opportunities and the flexibility to choose when, where and how they should learn. This takes advantage of one of the greatest strengths of open and distance learning.

Before each workshop, four team leaders and a coordinator from the host country spend five days of orientation together. This gives them an understanding of the VUSSC concept and its relevance to the topic area in which they are experts. They systematically plan for the workshop and develop a curriculum framework to be used as a guide during the workshop. There is email and other online interactions with all the participants before the workshop after the team leader orientation, but experience showed that the real interaction starts after people meet face-to-face and have got to know each other.

One challenge is that even after spending time together in the workshops, it can be very challenging for busy people to remain actively involved in online communities of practice once they return home. People in small developing countries are usually engaged in many activities simultaneously and they have to battle with limited bandwidth, large class loads and limited teaching resources.

The workshops are highly practical. Workshops take place in a computer laboratory and buddy-teaching is the most common manner of learning. Lectures and presentations are kept to a minimum in order to maximise practical, hands-on experience. The practical approach that has emerged involves searching for available Open Educational Resources on the Internet, copying, pasting and editing the materials into a template, sharing the drafts with other teams (there are usually five teams), re-editing the content and then restarting the cycle. Each small unit is completed, shared and stored until the end of the workshop when

they are all merged into one learning module. The module is edited by an external course developer who consults with the group online to finalise the material.

Internet technologies are used so that participants get lots of practice and they maintain contact long afterwards using the IT infrastructure provided by COL. The online collaboration platform or workshop space has been used quite successfully in the preparation of workshop participants. These two technologies have shown themselves to be most suitable: all participants use MS Word in their daily work, and the private online platform gives them the freedom to communicate with other group members. All materials to date have been developed in the English language, following the fairly standard practice across Commonwealth countries.

One participant summarised the impact of the work:

Improving ICT capacity [is part of the] national agenda; producing learner materials that are relevant to our needs and culture, but also sensitive to global perspectives. ODL allows us to improve education in our outer islands where there is little provision and to offer adult education for working individuals to acquire further qualifications in a way that is convenient for them. (Workshop participant, Seychelles Boot Camp, March 2008)

These training workshops have brought together a range of educators from various topic areas selected from the list agreed by the policy-makers. Nine of these workshops have been held to date, each hosted by one of the small states:

1. 2006 - Mauritius: Tour Guiding and Starting Your Own Business

2. 2007 - Singapore: Training Educators to Design and Develop ODL Materials

3. 2007 - Trinidad: Life Skills Development

4. 2007 - Samoa: Introduction to Disaster Management

5. 2008 - Seychelles: Introduction to Developing and Managing Small-Scale Fisheries

6. 2008 - Bahamas: Safety Practices in the Building Construction Industry

7. 2009 - Samoa: Port Management

8. 2010 - Maldives: Agriculture and Agro industry

9. 2011 - Lesotho: Business and Entrepreneurship

Creating course materials centrally by a specialist and then distributing them to the small states might have been an easy way forward for the VUSSC. But this would have missed the key objective of building the human capacity of national institutions in the small states. The training workshops were aimed at increasing the technical competence of educators so that they could return to their countries with skills they could apply to their institutions and educational sector. They also returned with course materials they had worked on during the training.

One participant commented:

This kind of collaboration is a powerful medium to use to develop oneself and country. It is about sharing resources in knowledge and skills, so makes a change for the better, in the life of someone who needs it . . . I have come to see and learn in my lifetime . . . that access to information is a powerful tool. . . now, how to disseminate that information in a structured manner so that it is used in a positive way and empowers individuals for the better, is to me, part of what VUSSC is all about!(Workshop participant, Samoa Boot Camp, November 2007)

Developing learning content has forced COL to investigate copyright licenses more deeply, especially in the case of Creative Commons licenses. All materials that have been developed carry open copyright licenses such as CC-BY, CC-BY-SA and CC-BY-NC and are available on COL's and VUSSC websites at www.col.org/vussc and www.vussc.info.

By February 2009, all 32 Commonwealth small states (which represent two-thirds of Commonwealth membership) had decided to participate in VUSSC and over 200 people had taken part in workshops facilitated by COL. We estimate that well over 700 additional people have received training from workshop participants and the use of the learning materials continues to expand the benefits.

The Expansion of Tertiary Education through an Accreditation System

As course materials were being developed VUSSC participants realised that they had to address the issue of quality, credibility and recognition of courses. In partnership with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) they developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF).

The TQF is a ten level framework. It is not meant to replace existing qualifications frameworks in the small states. It is a translation instrument between the systems in different countries and regions to give momentum to the transfer of courses, qualifications and learners between countries. It will also provide a means by which qualifications frameworks can be compared and allow for referencing of all qualifications to the TQF levels.

VUSSC has created an internet portal that provides online programmes offered by accredited institutions in VUSSC countries. These institutions, having already received accreditation from their national system, will be able to promote selected programmes to the international market through the VUSSC portal. Once eLearning programmes have been approved by the national and regional structures, they will be posted on the VUSSC website. Posting of programmes on the VUSSC website will signify that the programme is credible, i.e. that it aligns with national and regional qualifications structures and relates to the TQF.

Learners will register for these programmes with the knowledge that programmes offered through the portal will carry the national accreditation of the country in which the providing institution is based. In addition to this, learners will be able to review the comparability of the qualification with their own country by reviewing the qualification's registration in the Transnational Qualifications Framework.

National institutions are now able to offer educational programmes that are co-branded with VUSSC provided they are approved by the national bodies responsible for quality assurance and or accreditation and where applicable, the Regional Qualification Authority. The VUSSC has already started to run online courses in collaboration with the University of the West Indies (UWI) and the International Institute for International Planning (IIEP).

More countries are planning to offer VUSSC courses; these include Botswana, Trinidad and Tobago, the Seychelles, Lesotho and Samoa. The list is not exhaustive, other small states are also preparing to start offering VUSSC developed courses.

Conclusion

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth which is a network of Ministries of Education is working together to strengthen tertiary level institutions in small states. It has been successful in achieving a range of outcomes, particularly at the level of the individual participant. These include: enhanced computer skills and confidence levels; capacity-building in ODL and ICT; enhanced teamwork and collaborative skills; increased appreciation for diverse cultural contexts; exposure to a range of technologies including Instructional Design and online collaboration; development and maintenance of an expanded global network of professional educators; empowered practitioners who feel able to adapt curriculum more freely; and participation in an ongoing collaborative learning community.

It has developed of pool of courses and programmes that national institutions are now able to use and to offer that are co-branded with VUSSC provided they are approved by a national authority and where applicable, a regional body responsible for qualifications and quality assurance.

The VUSSC has been extensively evaluated (Dunlop, Monitoring and Evaluation report 2008a; 2008b) with very positive results. It has proved challenging to evaluate every outcome because even in small states it is impossible to track all uses of the learning materials and the impact of expanding the number of trained people.

References

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