What is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth?
A Guide for Commonwealth Vice-Chancellors

Association of Commonwealth Universities

Conference of Executive Heads
Hyderabad, India
29 November 2008

Theme
University Management Innovation: Delivering Distributed Learning

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Abstract

In 2000, fearing that their countries would be left behind by the Internet revolution, the Ministers of Education of the Commonwealth's 32 small states decided to create the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUUSC). This is not a new degree-awarding institution but rather a network that enables ministries and tertiary institutions to engage collectively with eLearning. The Commonwealth of Learning is facilitating the project. So far some 500 people have been trained in the skills of collaborative online working and teams made up of academics from many small states have developed eLearning materials, in the form of Open Learning Resources, in the areas of tourism and hospitality, life skills, professional development for teachers, disaster management, fisheries and building safety. A Transnational Qualifications Framework is a translation point between the regions and provides momentum for the transfer of courses, qualifications and learners between countries.

Introduction

The theme of this session is *University Management Innovation: Delivering Distributed Learning*.

Our task is to give you a brief sketch of the *Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth*, which is a good fit to nearly every word of that theme. We shall start by setting the context and then we shall answer the standard questions about the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, which we call the VUSSC.

Context

The key element of context is to recall that 32 of the 53 Member States of the Commonwealth are identified as small states. They mostly have populations of fewer than 1.5 million people and include island states in the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, the Pacific and the Indian oceans, as well as landlocked states like Lesotho and coastal states like The Gambia.

These 32 Commonwealth small states account for about three-quarters of all the world's small states, so the Commonwealth takes a lead role internationally in promoting their interests. These states share a number of challenges. Their fragile economies are very sensitive to changes in the terms of trade for their exports, which are mainly agricultural. Transport costs are high for both the landlocked and island nations. Finally, they are particularly sensitive to a range of natural disasters: hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis and the general rise in sea-level.

Why the VUSSC?

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. When they held their triennial conference in Canada in 2000 they faced two challenges.

First, the UN's Millennium Declaration and the Dakar World Forum on Education for All had put the spotlight on the imperative of expanding 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. Online communication seemed to have the potential to transform education and neither prophets nor vendors hesitated to claim that traditional educational methods would soon be swept into the dustbin of history. Henceforward all true learning would take place in front of the computer screen.

The ministers from the small states were determined that their countries should engage with the online world but doubted 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 tributary, 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) and asked COL to help them.

What is the VUSSC?

So what is this Virtual University and what is it for? It has been said that the Holy Roman Empire was neither holy, Roman, 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. It is a collaborative network of the small states of the Commonwealth that has a number of aims.

The first is to expand tertiary education in these countries - both face-to-face offerings 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 Seychelles and St. Lucia, are developing 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.

The second aim is to enable the small states to be players in the world of online learning. Bridging the digital divide is a key objective.

When did the VUSSC develop?

When was the VUSSC created and what were the milestones in its development? The idea was hatched at 14CCEM, the Education Ministers conference in 2000 and COL was asked to help with a smaller group of Ministers develop a formal proposal. This was approved at 15CCEM in Edinburgh in 2003 and COL was asked to continue facilitating the project.

By 2005 some twenty small states expressed interest in participate and stipulated, through their Ministers, that the VUSSC should help them develop programmes on skills-related post-secondary topics and nurture their capacity to develop and offer online courses.

Since then the VUSSC has developed steadily and has created a snowball effect - even though few of the small states ever experience snow. As of early 2008 all 32 small states have said they wish to be involved and Sierra Leone has joined in too.

The most visible milestones in its progress, which have done much to generate a sense of excitement and momentum around the VUSSC, have been the six course development workshops, or boot camps, that we shall describe later. 2008 has also seen two other significant developments.

First, working with the South African Qualifications Authority VUUSC members have developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework to facilitate movement of courses and programmes between states. Establishing the credibility of VUSSC offerings is particularly important since a number of the small states have, whether deservedly or not, acquired a reputation for being safe havens for the operations of degree mills and bogus institutions.

Second, in November 2008 the University of the West Indies offered the first fully online course under the VUSSC banner, with students enrolling from many countries in the network. The next major milestone will be the launch, in 2009 of a VUSSC portal giving details of the courses that accredited institutions in the small states are offering internationally.

Where does the money come from?

The proposal for VUUSC that the Ministers approved in 2003 called for the expenditure of some $20 million over the first five years. However, no donors stepped forward to fund the infrastructure costs of the VUSSC so rather than being developed as a donor project from the top down it has been built from the bottom up as a bootstrap operation. This may be no bad thing.

However, funds for some operating costs have been forthcoming. Given the importance of small states to the Commonwealth the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation has given a multi-year grant. Because of the VUSSC's commitment to developing courseware as open educational resources the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation has supported some of the course development workshops, as has the Government of Singapore. Finally, COL has integrated support of the VUSSC into its programme and the states themselves have invested significantly in the salary costs of their nationals who have attended VUSSC events.

How is the VUSSC managed?

Our next question is how is the VUSSC managed? Although COL has provided much of the managerial and administrative 'glue' so far, the VUUSC is not a COL project but an initiative of the small states themselves. 2008 probably marked the tipping point when the states took over the management of the VUSSC through the creation of a formal steering committee for the initiative overall and another group to oversee the implementation of the Transnational Qualifications Framework. A symbolic moment occurred at the 5th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning in London in July 2008 when a VUSSC team from the small states presented the initiative without COL's involvement.

However, COL will continue its behind-the-scenes support and, as of January 2009 will have an Education Specialist, John Lesperance of Seychelles, dedicated full-time to the VUSSC.

What about the boot camps?

Most people who have heard of the VUSSC will have heard about the course development workshops, familiarly known as boot camps because of the basic training they provide in IT skills. There have been six boot camps to date:

2006 - Mauritius: Tourism and Entrepreneurship

2007 - Singapore: Professional Development for Education

2007 - Trinidad & Tobago: Life Skills

2007 - Samoa: Disaster Management

2008 - Seychelles: Fisheries

2008 - Bahamas: Building and Construction

These events bring together subject experts from up to 20 states for a period of three weeks. They are given the training necessary to develop eLearning materials through online collaboration and begin the development of eLearning materials in the subject area. This course development work continues, through online collaboration, once the participants go home.

An important duty for the participants is to share the skills they learned with at least five colleagues when they get home and train them in the work of online collaboration and eLearning development. One hundred people have attended the six boot camps so there are now 500 academics and officials in the small states with advanced IT and eLearning skills.

How does the VUSSC develop Open Educational Resources?

We mentioned that the VUSSC materials are prepared in the form of Open Educational Resources (OERs). This means that they can be taken, adapted and used. Time here does not allow us to explain in detail how our methods for preparing OERs have evolved, but this is described in a number of papers on the COL website at www.col.org/speeches.

In the coming weeks we shall launch a VUSSC portal which will list all the eLearning courses from the small states that are accredited and available internationally. We mentioned that the first such course to attract an international clientele from the small states is a course in Managing and Facilitating Online Instruction from the University of the West Indies.

Conclusion

We hope that this short account of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth has given you an idea of the successful implementation of the vision of the Ministers of Education of the

Small States for their countries to become equal players in the eWorld. The initiative has now achieved lift off and we believe that it will contribute substantially to the development of tertiary education in the small states of the Commonwealth in the years to come.