

# *Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth*

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*Commonwealth Ministerial Meeting on Small States*

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*Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC)*

*From Concept to Implementation: Building National Capabilities*

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*Commonwealth of Learning*

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## **Transcript**

Secretary-General, Honourable Ministers, Excellencies and delegates:

It is an honour to be here at the Commonwealth Ministerial Meeting on Small States. The purpose of my presentation is to give you a brief overview of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth or VUSSC. I hope in the short space of five minutes, you will be able to get an idea of how VUSSC moved from concept and implementation and the contribution this initiative is making to building national capacities.

The idea for VUSSC came from your ministers of education, when they met for their triennial conference in 2000 and the Commonwealth of Learning was assigned the responsibility of implementing this initiative in 2003. The ministers were concerned that their countries might not be able to benefit from the dot.com boom. But if they worked together they could develop a collective capacity for harnessing new ICT developments for increasing access to quality tertiary education in their countries.

It was agreed that this Virtual University would be unique. It would:

- Enable small states to be contributors, as well as consumers, by developing a cadre of people with the skills to implement virtual education systems
- Strengthen existing tertiary institutions making them more responsive to emerging needs
- Permit the delivery of courses in a variety of formats according to available technologies

COL decided, therefore, to build the VUSSC from the bottom up rather than from the top down. The new organisation would be a network rather than a new university competing with existing providers. Today VUSSC has grown into a network of 31 small states dedicated to expanding access to tertiary education. This collaborative network is supported by a Management Committee consisting of six representatives from all regions of the Commonwealth.

What has the VUSSC achieved so far?

VUSSC has held several capacity building workshops in various small states. Participants of the workshops learned to develop online courses in a very practical way. VUSSC has developed fifteen courses which were identified by the small states themselves. These are now being shared freely as open educational resources or OER. Institutions have started to offer these courses. VUSSC has its own web presence and a Learning Management System (LMS) for participating institutions to use.

More than 21,000 people have been trained through VUSSC activities since 2006. Nine institutions in 8 small states are offering VUSSC developed courses such as a certificate in Sustainable Tourism or a Bachelors in Business and Entrepreneurship. VUSSC has reached over 600 learners and the numbers continue to grow.

The participating states are scattered over all regions of the Commonwealth. In order to facilitate the use of jointly developed courses in all states, VUSSC developed a Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF). Its purpose is to aid comparability between regions, give credibility to the eLearning courses and promote the mobility of students.

As you can see, the number of institutions that have participated in VUSSC activities is quite impressive.

The National University of Samoa has been offering the Diploma in Sustainable Agriculture developed by VUSSC. The first group of students graduated this year and the most rewarding aspect is that all graduates are in full-time employment.

From a different region of the Commonwealth, the Caribbean, Ms. Marcia Musgrove, a school teacher in The Bahamas, writes to say and I quote “Being a participant and team leader at a VUSSC workshop ...not only helped me to grow in personal ways, but has also spawned a series of opportunities to aid my professional development. I think of it as “The VUSSC Snowball Effect”... in the tropics”, unquote.

Through VUSSC COL is collaborating with the Economic Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat in the delivery of an online course on International Architecture for Environment & Sustainable Development. The course is currently being offered through a partnership with the Indian Ocean Commission. VUSSC is also working in partnership with the Commonwealth Youth Programme, Commonwealth Secretariat and The Commonwealth Youth Programme, Caribbean Centre (CYPCC), to map the Youth Work Competency Standards to the TQF.

As we go forward, VUSSC will continue to strengthen tertiary education institutions in the small states. The advances in cloud computing and eLearning will give small states the opportunity to collaborate in real-time across any distance. COL will continue to provide institutional support to offer online courses. Developments in mobile networks will increase speed and further reduce the costs of bandwidth. The

Transnational Qualifications Framework has the potential to promote cross border education and give the small states access to world class online education. And finally, VUSSC will continue to promote Commonwealth cooperation leading to bilateral and multilateral linkages between Member States.

Thank you for your kind attention.