

# *Update on the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth*

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*16th Conference of Commonwealth Ministers of Education*

*Cape Town, South Africa  
10 December 2006*

*Sir John Daniel and Paul West  
Commonwealth of Learning*

## **Part 1** **(Sir John Daniel)**

Ministers, Head and Members of Delegations, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for coming to share lunch with us and hear about progress in the development of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. This is an important ministerial initiative which the Commonwealth of Learning is facilitating on your behalf.

Let me give the summary and the punch line at the beginning. First, we are making excellent progress; we are taking the Small States into some very exciting and advanced use of ICTs; there is considerable excitement and anticipation amongst those involved and we are now at a crucial stage where things are really starting to happen. But second, the success of the VUSSC in your country will depend on your engagement in the programme, which you can best express by ensuring that staff in your Ministries and in your institutions devotes serious time and commitment to it.

Now let me go back to the beginning. You know that of the 53 countries of the Commonwealth 32 are categorised as Small States. That is two-thirds of the Commonwealth membership and, moreover, the Commonwealth's Small States account for about three-quarters of the world's Small States. Helping the Small States is an important part of the mission of the Commonwealth of Learning and Commonwealth organisations generally.

The idea of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth came from the Ministers themselves at the 14<sup>th</sup> CCEM in Halifax, Canada in 2000. They later endorsed a formal proposal for it at

the 15<sup>th</sup> CCEM in Edinburgh and COL has been helping the participating countries to get the show on the road since then.

As of now 26 of the Commonwealth's Small States are involved - plus Comoros, which begged to take part.

The Ministers' aim, when they conceived the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth in Halifax, was to develop a virtual university to particularly serve the small states of the Commonwealth, using existing structures and capacity.

Their expectations were that this initiative would expand access to learning, enable Small States to show leadership educational reform; and leapfrog into new uses of ICTs so as to be players in global development rather than depending on others.

You saw the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth not as a new institution but as a consortium of your institutions working together to develop courses and support learners.

The fundamental aim, which we cannot emphasise too often, is that the aim is to strengthen the existing post-secondary institutions in your countries. This means that the VUSSC is located wherever collaborative activity is taking place. COL is there in a facilitative role.

The principle is strength in numbers: doing together what would be difficult for any one state to do alone.

Ministers also agreed that although the VUSSC would be a multi-media operation, using whatever media are appropriate to reach learners in each country, they wanted to use it as an opportunity to develop expertise in eLearning. We at COL have taken that wish very seriously and we believe that the VUSSC participants are positioning themselves at the cutting edge of developments in eLearning.

Ministers also agreed that although this is a programme of the Small States is to open to all who are ready to collaborate and share. Of the 32 Commonwealth Small States 26 are now on board, along with Comoros.

So far we have secured funds for the development of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth from two sources, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation of the USA, which is particularly interested in the way that the project is developing Open Educational Resources, and the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation. The CFTC has allocated £ 1 million over four years as part of its policy of supporting human resource development in the Commonwealth.

A major use of these funds has been to hold planning, organisational and course development meetings as shown on this schedule. Although much of the work of course development will take place online and at a distance, we believed that to start the project going people needed to meet. At the meetings the representatives from your countries play one of two roles.

One is to be a link to your government and ensure that the VUSSC's planning reflects your priorities: we call these interlocutors. The other is to work on the development and delivery of courses: these are the implementers. Sometimes one person plays both roles but we see the roles as distinct.

One thing that it is important to get right is the subjects on which courses and programmes will focus. This list was the result of correspondence with governments back in 2004 and the planning meetings in Singapore last year and this year. As you can see the VUSSC is focussing on skills and livelihood related courses.

A very important milestone in the development of your Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth happened in August this year. This was the first course development meeting. It was held in Mauritius over three weeks and I thank the Government of Mauritius and the University of Mauritius for the splendid environment that they created. It was quickly nicknamed the 'Boot Camp' because for many participants it was a basic training in working online.

Participants were introduced to the ICT components of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, open source software, Wikis, and ePortfolios. They created content on Tourism and Hospitality and on Small Business Management and I am delighted to report that in the time available they created three times as much material as we expected. This course development work is continuing with your colleagues contributing online from around the Commonwealth.

We were very impressed by how fast the participants picked up the skills and they are now providing buddy-training to their colleagues back in your countries. This illustrates what a useful tool the VUSSC will be in bridging the digital divide.

Let me conclude with a word on the roles of the various players in this exciting programme, starting with COL.

COL got involved with the VUSSC after 14CCEM in Halifax when Ministers conceived the idea and asked COL to work up a proposal with them. Since then we have coordinated the initiative; we have helped to create networks between countries; we have put all our considerable expertise in educational technology at the disposal of the participants; we have assisted in building local capacity; we have sought funds for the programme and invested some of COL's resources.

But it is important to understand what COL is not.

COL is not a degree-awarding body. COL is not the Virtual University. Awards made as a result of VUSSC study will be made by institutions in your countries and we are working with you to facilitate arrangements for credit transfer and recognition of qualifications.

This is not COL's project, it is your project and your Ministries have a crucial role. It is to develop policy, so that this fits in with your national priorities; it is to liaise with other ministries, because some of the courses are of interest to them; it is to allocate people and responsibilities; it is to support and monitor the implementation of the programme. I think it is fair to say that the beneficial impact of the VUSSC will depend very directly on the extent to which you get your people engaged and have them take responsibility for it.

This must be done in close collaboration with your institutions, which will have the responsibility for linking into the international teams developing the courses and then adapting and delivering them in

appropriate ways in your countries. They will also, as I just said, make the arrangements for students to get recognised awards for the courses and programmes that they study.

I shall stop there. It is six years since Ministers conceived the idea of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth and three years since they approved a formal proposal. Since then we have made steady progress and now I feel there is real momentum. What we are doing is being watched with interest all over the world because nothing like this has ever happened before.

Far from being a 'catch-up' project the Small States are breaking new ground by developing Open Educational Resources collaboratively online. In the end, however, the impact of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth will depend on how fully and energetically the member states and their institutions get involved. COL is there to leverage their efforts to maximum effect.

Let me now open this up to discussion and invite your questions and comments. In a moment I shall ask my colleague Paul West, who has been closely involved at every stage, to tell you about the next steps in the VUSSC's development.

## Part II (Mr Paul West)

Ministers, Head and Members of Delegations, Ladies and Gentlemen:

As Sir John has already outlined, much progress has been achieved in the last few years. The first pragmatic steps toward developing capacity were achieved through the creation of a virtual team to work on the creation of post-secondary programmes in Tourism and Entrepreneurship. Team leaders were nominated by Trinidad and Tobago, Botswana, Seychelles and Samoa, and a coordinator based in Mauritius. A three-week, 13-country training process held in Mauritius, was affectionately called a "boot camp". This resulted in a small diaspora being created from scratch. The team is now empowered to be able to collaborate online from their home countries while they continue their work. This team had planned to create 10 notional learning hours of learning material in each of tourism and entrepreneurship while in Mauritius and then to complete and offer the programme within a 2-year period. The teams found they quickly developed the skills to create about 30 notional learning hours while in Mauritius. Some countries plan to begin incorporating the content into programmes in 2007.

The intention now is to build the skills of key staff in VUSSC member countries to create additional teams, or "new Diaspora". Each person that participates in a boot camp needs to continue to develop learning content and manage the implementation of programmes. By doing this, the existing team can enable member countries to offer new programmes, previously not offered. If each of the team members train 3 others, VUSSC will have created an initial cadre of about 40 people. These people will all have the skills to strengthen institutions by enabling them to offer new programmes. Additional boot camps planned over the next 3-years will train some 100 institutional content specialists to work and collaborate online. With their onward training, more than an additional 300 content specialists can be trained. If we total up the above, we come to some 450 content directly or indirectly trained over the next few years.

This number can be much higher, depending on the time for this work that is included in your specialist's job description. It goes without saying that access to computers with good internet access is essential.

To make this part of the task of creating VUSSC a success, we ask that you ensure that the most suitable people are nominated to participate in boot camps - that is, good content specialists who work for national institutions or the ministry and that these people have this important work built into their job descriptions. It would be pointless for these people to participate in the boot camp and then return to other duties and not support the ongoing VUSSC work. They also, cannot be expected to perform all the VUSSC work in their personal time on behalf of their country.

## A Qualifications Framework

A somewhat complex task requested by interlocutors on your behalf is to help establish the interoperability of qualifications between countries. This task requires agreed qualifications frameworks and cooperation between institutions in multiple countries. Experience in this already exists amongst some VUSSC members, for example in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean. We have also found we can also learn from and use experience of UNESCO. This process will be started in the 2007-8 year and expertise will once again be called on from all VUSSC member countries.

## The offering model

Since there is no central "virtual university", there will be no central organisation offering VUSSC courses. Your institutional staff who participate in boot camps, or are trained by past boot-campers have the obligation to ensure that their hard work is translated into courses offered by your institutions and that carry the accreditation of your country. It remains up to your institutions to take advantage of the strengths that VUSSC is creating.

## The funding model

The activities already mentioned have been possible with the financial support received from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Commonwealth Secretariat. While organisations such COL and various funding agencies might continue to assist with the support of workshops, training and travel, each VUSSC member will need to provide the professional and administrative human resources needed to make VUSSC work.

As mentioned above, we can expect some financial support from agencies, but this will always be limited. The limited activities that can be arranged for multiple VUSSC countries, such as boot camps, must be complemented with in-country workshops, training and follow-up to ensure the implementation of new programmes. This initiative depends on an active participation by your Ministries and institutions.

Thank you.