

The Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) and its Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF)



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Transcript

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for taking time to listen to this presentation about the 32 small states of the Commonwealth. My colleagues and I have contributed toward this paper and we hope you will find it useful.

Relating to the title of this session, can we really say “Best Practice” or should we rather say “Good Practice”. When working in “the real world”, maybe we need to focus much more on “What Worked”. By that I mean what worked under a particular set of conditions, at a time, and it is not even something that we can be sure will always work under other circumstances! I will highlight a number of lessons we have learned, and you may find these useful, but with differing circumstances around the world and within countries, what might work in one situation, may not be appropriate in another setting. Where you see the “That worked!” symbol in the lower right hand corner of the slide, you can take it that something here seemed to work out well. Maybe one day we will even call it a best practice!

Introduction

Ministers of Education of the small states of the Commonwealth conceived the idea of having a Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth at their triennial Conference of Commonwealth Ministers of Education in 2000. An investigation was launched into this possibility by the Commonwealth of Learning and a possible model was presented to Ministers at their next conference in 2003.

The concept of a virtual university as a network rather than an institution was approved and COL was asked to help countries collaborate and strengthen the capacity of existing national education institutions.

The concept of sharing programmes of study was a fundamental principle from the start, so working with Creative Commons copyright licenses and the need to establish a "Transnational Qualifications Framework" (TQF) became apparent.

The TQF is currently becoming a translation point between national systems in the 32 countries making up the small states of the Commonwealth and there appears to be interest in the concept from other countries.

National institutions that wish to offer educational programmes that are co-branded with VUSSC will have these approved within the institution, by the national qualification authority and where applicable, the regional qualification authority. The programmes that fulfil these requirements will be posted with their accreditation status on the VUSSC website which is now under its final stages of development.

Background

We will start by providing a little context so that you know what the Commonwealth of Learning is and why it is involved in the Virtual University Initiative for small states. COL was established 20 years ago, by the Heads of Government of Commonwealth countries who felt a technical agency was needed to encourage the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies.

The most important technologies when COL was established were radio, television, audio recorders and so on. Today, technologies have evolved, and COL's role has move with the field. We now help Ministries of Education and their national institutions to gain skills in technologies such as the use of computers and the Internet, while still supporting the use of radio and television.

Relating to the VUSSC, at the turn of the century, we saw a strong focus on what turned into the "dotcom bubble". There had been the largest ever meeting of Heads of Government at the United Nations that had approved the Millennium Declaration and before this, the World Economic Forum had set its six targets for Education for All.

At the same time as the world's richest countries were forging ahead, there was concern over the rapid advances simply becoming yet another divide between the haves and the have not's. Ministers of small states did not want to be left out and so they asked COL to look into the feasibility of establishing a virtual university to help improve the skills in their education sectors, increase the range of course

offerings and help to make it more possible for their countries to fully participate in the rapidly expanding world of the Internet.

During the investigation that took place between 2000 and 2003, it was quickly established that an independent virtual university operating separately from the small states could easily end up as a competitor rather than a support structure. The new entity would need to be supportive, and to build human skills rather than to develop them in another country and then deliver courses to citizens. Traditional consortiums of institutions had also shown their challenges and so a supportive, capacity-building model was conceived.

The 32 small states are those developing countries of the Commonwealth that have populations of under 4.5 million people. Some are landlocked, such as Lesotho and Swaziland in southern Africa, while others are surrounded by thousands of kilometres of sea, like Samoa and Vanuatu in the Pacific. All countries have their own unique challenges such as those relating to Internet bandwidth, limited resources and climate change.

The concept document approved by Ministers in 2003 stated that ‘the virtual university will be as much concerned with adding value to conventional on-campus instruction as it is with serving learners at a distance.’ It is important that one should not simply focus on one “formula”; a range of possibilities increases options for learners.

Capacity building of people and systems was therefore at the centre of the design from the start.

A similarity you may find between the small states and the countries in your region is the desire to have locally acquired qualifications recognised by other countries. A concern you may share is that once citizens have acquired internationally accredited qualifications, they may choose to move to jobs in other countries! But this one “goes both ways”. You can also attract skills from those countries!

The approved concept document I mentioned earlier also stated that the small states could benefit by: ‘providing accreditation systems to develop quality standards and ensure that they are met.’ While not yet met, this seems to be a good idea that is finding traction in many countries.

Turning Vision into Pragmatic Plans

Although it carried the approval of Ministers of Education, the VUSSC did not start out its existence with abundant funding and it continues to flourish with limited funding. Creativity has been stimulated through limited resources to achieve the vision of Ministers without being held back by financial issues.

COL supported the first meeting of policy makers, or Interlocutors, and then the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation in the USA stepped in to help support the next phase of development. During this phase, the ideas were discussed and translated into action plans and a list of important topic areas that needed attention. The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation has provided much more extensive financial support since in the last three years.

The first 3-week training session was held in Mauritius, attended by educators from 14 countries. Lessons learned from this first experience has helped to form the basis for an evolving training programme for educators from the small states in the pragmatic use of ICTs in education.

Each of the training workshops, sometimes called “bootcamps”, has brought together a range of educators from a particular topic area selected from the list agreed by the policy-makers.

Six of these workshops have been held to date, each hosted by one of the small states:

2006	Mauritius	Tourism & Entrepreneurship
2007	Singapore	Professional Development of Educators
2007	Trinidad & Tobago	Life Skills
2007	Samoa	Disaster Management
2008	Seychelles	Fisheries
2008	The Bahamas	Construction

With a need for funding to support the activities of VUSSC, the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation of the Commonwealth Secretariat stepped in and has supported both the training workshops and the establishment of the Transnational Qualifications Framework or “TQF”.

Creating course materials and distributing them might have been an easy way forward for the VUSSC. The development of materials could simply have been contracted out to authors and institutions, collected and distributed to the small states. This would however, have missed the point entirely when it came to 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 home countries with skills they could apply to their institutions and economic sector. They also returned with some course materials they had worked on during the training.

Materials developed during the training were designed to be approximately one semester course in duration, at a post-secondary level. The units have been copyrighted under a Creative Commons license that permits anyone use the materials free of charge. We encourage you to not only make use of learning materials developed by others, but to also share your course materials with other countries in a similar way.

By following this model, over 130 professional educators from 26 countries have met and learned new skills that are now impacting on the education systems of their home countries, and have formed international networks of people in their areas of expertise.

They have also each trained colleagues in the use of a range of technologies, adding to the multiplier effect of VUSSC.

The catalyst needed to help institutions offer courses internationally

At this time, all the Commonwealth small states have joined the VUSSC initiative. Those participating states are from all over the world.

In order to facilitate the certification of courses across the small states, the VUSSC has worked with the South African Qualifications Authority to develop the Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF). Its purpose is to aid comparability between regions and help give credibility to courses offered by national institutions in small states. As a starting point, the framework is aimed at helping to build systemic capacity in Commonwealth small states, but interest has been expressed that it could be used by non-Commonwealth countries as well. I think you may find similarities between it and the one developed here in Dubai.

The investigation leading up to the senior officials meeting in 2008 on the TQF showed that the unique characteristics of the VUSSC required the proposed TQF to be much more limited in scope than national and/or regional qualifications authority.

More specifically, the TQF should be:

- non-regulatory
- not replace sectoral, national or regional qualifications frameworks or authorities
- based on the principles of simplicity, incrementalism and local involvement
- aimed at supporting the transfer of credits achieved in different countries.

The TQF is defined as a translation instrument for the classification of qualifications between countries participating in the VUSSC, according to set criteria for specified levels of learning achieved, to improve credit transfer and promote common accreditation mechanisms between VUSSC member countries. The purpose of the TQF is to facilitate the development and effective delivery of relevant and quality-assured VUSSC qualifications.

The TQF is a unified qualifications framework that includes higher education qualifications and post-secondary technical and vocational qualifications offered through nationally approved institutions, in participating VUSSC countries. Participating countries agreed that the TQF should not infringe in any way on national and regional developments, yet should still be able to provide mechanisms for co-ordination, credit transfer and common accreditation.

Within the TQF, a credit provides a measure of learning outcomes achieved in notional hours, at a given level. It is awarded for learning that has been achieved and verified through reliable and valid assessment.

In contrast to national qualifications frameworks that are often prescriptive and comprehensive, the TQF will not be able demand alignment. It offers a means to compare different qualification systems in multiple countries without having to do this on a bilateral basis. It will also be able to provide a forum to encourage peer review where participating institutions and Ministries of Education find it necessary.

The TQF will be run by a “virtual” TQF Management Committee, as a sub-committee of the VUSSC Interlocutors, who are responsible for the Initiative. The Committee is supported by the Education Specialist for VUSSC at COL, based in Vancouver. The Education Specialist liaises with the web developer to have courses added to the VUSSC portal website.

Existing qualifications can be modified if necessary, to meet TQF requirements. New qualifications to meet identified common topics in demand, can be developed by providers with the appropriate expertise, and both can be shared with other small states. Importantly, country participation will be voluntary and therefore the scope of the framework will depend on the extent to which it provides clear benefits to learners, providers and quality-assurance agencies. In due course, specific cross-accreditation will be encouraged and an institutional peer review mechanism will be made available.

The Internet portal or hub website that has been created for VUSSC will provide access to online programmes offered by accredited institutions in participating 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 website. Posting of programmes on the VUSSC website will signify that the programme is credible, i.e. that it accords with national and regional qualifications structures and that it relates to the TQF.

VUSSC will not become a separate, international agency or institution offering new programmes. Rather, the existing national institutions in the small states and other participating countries that choose to co-brand their programmes with VUSSC, after having met the agreed checks, will offer the range of VUSSC programmes from multiple countries.

Learners will be able to register for these programmes with the knowledge that programmes offered through the website 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 TQF. This question of credibility is particularly important for small states, some of which have inadvertently acquired reputations as havens for degree mills.

Next Steps

Online courses for VUSSC participants began in 2008 and these will be increased in number as the frequency of face-to-face workshops are reduced over the next two years. With an increasing number of ICT-competent educators in small states, a more online approach to capacity building will be adopted while small states start to become providers of internationally offered education.

There have been discussions about the development of a broader TQF portal, separate from the VUSSC website, and we are waiting to see if there is significant interest in the creation of such a multinational mechanism.

If it progresses, a separate TQF portal could contain qualifications and units of qualification that have been registered on the TQF. In essence it would look like a global qualifications' database rather than a website of courses offered only by participating VUSSC countries.

There may be significant opportunities across countries around the world that wish to work collaboratively toward having a qualification framework and an exchange mechanism that enables the moving of courses and qualifications across borders more efficiently.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth is an emerging network of Ministries of Education that is working to strengthen national tertiary institutions. It embraces professional human resource development, the creation and offering of new courses, and the establishment of a transnational accreditation mechanism. These countries, comprising of both land-locked and island states, all face issues of isolation and brain drain, and are susceptible to the various impacts of climate change.

With no prior examples to follow that quite matched the circumstances and requests from governments, a new model was developed, along with an action learning approach that enabled the methodology to be changed, based on lessons learned. These international workshops have helped to improve the ICT skills of professional educators who have, in turn, trained colleagues in the use of computers and collaborating online.

Now that an increasing number of professional educators have stronger ICT skills, online training can be offered to an enlarged group of people. The establishment of a TQF portal would help to increase the credibility of programmes offered by small states in all regions of the world.

National institutions that wish to offer educational programmes that are co-branded with VUSSC will have these approved within the institution, by the national qualification authority and where applicable, the regional qualification authority. Whereas consortiums of institutions require business agreements, the kind of network the VUSSC is evolving, has the capacity to support institutions and national Ministries of Education where they are needed, so that each country increases its own capacity to offer more programmes of study that carry recognition in more countries.

In the case of VUSSC programmes that fulfil these requirements, these will be posted along with their accreditation status on the VUSSC website that is being developed.

A future development could result in a much broader TQF registry of programmes that carry multi-country accreditation.

Thank you for taking the time to hear about some of the experience of the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth.

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