

Referencing the Youth Development Programme on the Transnational Qualifications Framework



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Abstract

The Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF) was established by the *Commonwealth of Learning* initially in the context of the *Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC)*. Capacity building of educators and systems was at the centre of the design from the start. The TQF is currently becoming a translation point between national systems in more than 32 countries making up the small states of the Commonwealth and there appears to be interest in the concept from other 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. The purpose of the TQF is to facilitate the development and effective delivery of relevant and quality-assured qualifications.

The registration of the Commonwealth Youth Programme on the TQF will mean that learners will register for the programme with the knowledge that it is being offered by a nationally accredited institution. In addition to this, learners will be able to review the comparability of the qualification with their own country by reviewing qualification's registration in the TQF. Thus, their qualifications will be recognised nationally, regionally but most important of all, it will also be recognised internationally and across the Commonwealth. The nature of their qualification will allow them to work and study not only in their own country, but also in other countries.

Introduction

The idea for having a Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth was first conceived and discussed by Ministers of Education of the small states of the Commonwealth at their triennial Conference of Commonwealth Ministers of Education in 2000. The Commonwealth of Learning was tasked to develop a proposal that was presented to the Ministers at their next conference in 2003.

The concept of a virtual university that evolved was the establishment of a network rather than a brick and mortar institution. This concept was very well received by Ministers of Education and COL was asked to facilitate this process. The concept of sharing learning materials was a fundamental principle from the start and the materials produced are non-proprietary making it easier for contextualisation and the need to establish a "Transnational Qualifications Framework" became apparent.

The TQF is currently being used as a translation point between national systems of more than 32 countries making up the small states of the Commonwealth. 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.

Background

Let me 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. Established in 1989, by Heads of Government of the Commonwealth who felt the need for another body to encourage and promote the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies.

At the turn of the century, there was a strong focus on what turned into the “dot com 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.

Concurrently, the world’s richest countries were forging ahead, there was concern over the rapid advances simply becoming yet another divide between those who can afford and those who can’t. 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.

An investigation took place between 2000 and 2003, the results clearly 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, 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 small states participating in the VUSSC are those developing countries of the Commonwealth that have a relatively small population. Some are landlocked and others are surrounded by thousands of kilometres of sea. All countries have their own unique challenges such as those relating to Internet bandwidth, limited resources and climate change. The model 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. This is why capacity building of people and systems was very critical and was at the centre of the design from the very beginning.

Funding Support to help realise the VUSSC

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

COL supported some of the activities including meeting of policy makers, and then the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation 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.

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 TQF but this funding came to an end in 2009. However, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation continued to support the VUSSC but with limited funding.

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 countries with skills they could apply to their institutions and educational sector. They also returned with some course materials they had worked on during the training.

Materials developed in the course of 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 to 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, more than 250 professional educators from 30 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. To date more than 16,000 people, including educators and senior officials have been reached through VUSSC. More than 15 short

courses and fully fledged programmes have been developed and institutions have already started to offer some of these already.

A Mechanism to expand VUSSC globally

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. 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 countries not participating in VUSSC and non-Commonwealth countries as well.

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. It was decided that 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 coordination, credit transfer and common accreditation. 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 is 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, VUSSC, at COL, based in Vancouver.

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 the TQF system 1 credit equates to 10 notional hours of learning at the appropriate level – for example, a minimum of 120 credits at Certificate level 4 and a minimum of 240 credits at Diploma level 5.

Through this approach, the development of VUSSC qualifications by providers, including consortia, and through partnerships with industry can be encouraged and supported. Existing qualifications can be modified if necessary, to meet TQF requirements and shared with other small states through the mechanisms of the TQF. New qualifications to meet identified common areas of demand can be developed by providers with the appropriate expertise, and 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 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. Once eLearning programmes have been provided by these countries and 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 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.

The Youth Development Work

The Commonwealth Youth Programme, Caribbean Centre (CYPCC), has done remarkable work in response to the need to support the growth and development of practitioners in youth work occupations and has provide a number of specialized training programmes for youth work practitioners in the Caribbean. These programmes have been delivered in partnership with Ministries/Departments of Youth and Universities across the Commonwealth. While there has been certification at the Certificate and Diploma levels, CYPCC has also held a series of customized workshops for senior government officials, youth workers and youth leaders.

One of the strategic objectives of the Commonwealth Secretariat is the professionalisation of youth development work and in recognition of this, CYPCC worked with several industry experts, subject and technical specialists and advisors for a number of years, to develop occupational standards for Youth Development Work in the Caribbean.

Expanding the reach of standards transnationally using the TQF

The TQF was conceptualized as a reference system, linking together national qualifications systems and frameworks in different small states. As mentioned earlier in my presentation, the TQF functions as a translation device making qualifications more readable, allowing equivalences to be determined, helping learners, workers and employers to use and better understand the value of the qualifications. It is particularly useful for individuals who move between countries or change jobs.

A key aim of the TQF is to contribute to creating a workforce in small states that is mobile, flexible and has an international implication. This would facilitate greater access to quality-assured qualifications across the Commonwealth. The competency standards developed by the CYPCC have now been endorsed by CARICOM as the industry sector standards for Youth Work Development.

Given that the TQF is a unified framework, it provides a natural contextual setting for a common referenced framework whereby the Youth Work Development standards can be used across the Commonwealth. When the Youth Work Development programme is offered by an institution, students will be assured that the programme is relevant, quality assured and internationally recognized. The competency standards of CYPCC were developed using the five (5) level qualifications framework currently used in the English-speaking Caribbean (RQF), whereas the TQF was developed using 10 levels. It is imperative that the standards for the Youth Work Development are referenced against the TQF to ensure comparability and determine equivalence. This will ensure its usability across the Commonwealth small states.

Benefits of the VUSSC TQF to the Professional Development of Youth

The TQF mechanism is beneficial to the small states and to the learners who are delineated in various ways. Hence, students will have access to a greater number, variety and quality assured programmes/courses that could be co-branded by the VUSSC. Moreover, it will facilitate mobility of learners throughout the participating countries through credit transfer within the small states or Commonwealth, while also facilitating the portability of courses and recognition of qualifications between countries, since TQF is primarily a translation tool. Furthermore, international benchmarking by TQF will lead to improved competitiveness and standards of national education and training providers, while promoting capacity building using South-South cooperation as most of the small states face similar challenges. Additionally, programmes and courses meeting the transnational qualifications criteria will be registered on the TQF portal and will be referred to as “TQF registered qualifications” thus giving them value and visibility at international level.

Conclusion

The next phase is the implementation of the Transnational Qualifications Framework by the various member states. It must be noted that adherence to the TQF is voluntary and would not replace the respective existing local Qualification Framework. In fact, the Commonwealth of Learning and the TQF Management Committee both look forward to the implementation of the TQF with a view to drawing

parallels between existing qualification frameworks, while providing a means for member states to provide and have access to a number of online courses, which will, moreover, be mutually recognized by the different States. This translates well with the work carried out by the Commonwealth Secretariat (Youth Division) and the Commonwealth Youth Programme Caribbean Centre to reference the Youth Work Competency Standards.

The Transnational Qualifications Framework is meant to enhance transnational education and training system as well promoting education for all. Many countries share the same belief in the transformation of the system of education and training. They focus on the development of their manpower and the Transnational Qualifications Framework will provide them with a translation instrument that would allow comparability with bigger countries and promote the recognition of prior learning.