Technology for Collective Action: The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

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Abstract

In 2000 the triennial conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers took place against the heady backdrops of the Millennium Declaration and the dotcom frenzy. Fearing that their individual states did not have the critical mass of trained people and infrastructure to go it alone in integrating ICTs into education, the Ministers from the Small States created the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) as an instrument for collective action in the eWorld. Since then 32 Small States have worked together to: 1) train hundreds of their nationals in advanced skills for online collaboration; 2) create eLearning courses in Tourism, Life Skills, Building Safety, Disaster Management and Fisheries; and 3) develop a Transnational Qualifications Framework to facilitate the offering of these and other courses in Small States around the world.

Introduction

The idea for a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) was conceived at the Commonwealth Conference of Education Ministers in Halifax, Canada in 2000. Ministers from a number of small states were anxious about the rapid growth of the eWorld and the effect that it would have on their countries. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) was asked to advise the small states about how

they could take advantage of online technologies to develop their education systems. A small working group of Ministers met in Seychelles in 2003 to finalise the recommendations, which were approved by the Education Ministers at their next meeting later that year.

The VUSSC is designed to address some of the unique challenges facing the small states. Access to educational materials is a significant obstacle in these countries. Defined more by their small populations and relative isolation rather than their geographic size, small states often have limited natural resources and small populations without the range of skills needed for the global market. Small landlocked states face challenges in transporting goods; whereas island states confront the high cost of sea and air links. Small states are usually more vulnerable to natural calamities and are less able to recover from them quickly than countries with more extensive human and financial resources.

In this context, participating countries can benefit substantially from learning programmes designed by small states and for small states. The technological advances of recent years enable small states to connect, to collaborate and to participate in the revolution of the eWorld. Therefore the VUSSC is not a new tertiary institution but rather a consortium of Ministries of Education and institutions enabled by Information and Communications Technology (ICT) applications, working together to plan programmes, develop the required content and ensure delivery of these programmes and support services to learners.

While the small states differ considerably in population, culture and geography, they face many similar challenges. The VUSSC has created cross-border linkages that enable them to assist one another in informal ways. "Brain-drain" is often cited as a special challenge for small states. The development of the VUSSC has shown that for these countries brain drain involves not only the loss of skilled people, but also ensuring that their citizens' qualifications are recognised when they work in other countries. Similarly, when residents present foreign qualifications for local recognition they put an extra burden on ministry systems that are already under multiple pressures in these small jurisdictions. It quickly became clear that developing a Transnational Qualifications Framework would add great value to the VUSSC initiative.

The Evolving Nature of VUSSC

By 2004, when COL began working intensively with the small states to implement the plan for the VUSSC, the context for its creation had changed in many respects since the original idea was hatched in 2000.

The atmosphere of urgency generated by the dotcom frenzy of 2000 had proved to be ephemeral. We often overestimate the short-term impact of new developments whilst underestimating their long-term consequences. By 2004 it was clear that online learning was not going to render all previous educational methods obsolete. But although some of the early applications of eLearning had been disappointing, it was also clear that it had great potential and was beginning to seep gradually into all forms and levels of education.

The plan approved by the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in 2003 implied the

establishment and funding of a new Commonwealth body with its own organisational structure and headquarters. However, COL's enquiries quickly revealed that donors were not interested in funding a new intergovernmental agency or a central office for a university consortium, although they did express interest in the education and training outcomes that the VUSSC might yield, especially if they were linked to agreed development objectives.

COL decided, therefore, to build the VUSSC using a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach by starting with capacity building rather than establishing a head office for the consortium. It quickly became clear that participating countries did not want a new institution that would compete with their existing tertiary providers. They expected the new organisation to build capacity in the existing institutions, to support the creation of accreditation mechanisms and to facilitate the offering of educational programmes by small states for themselves and others. This was a novel task. Although there were various examples of consortiums and collaborative arrangements, there was no precedent for a capacity-building network of 30+ countries that wanted to operate collaboratively.

In late 2004 COL canvassed the Ministers of Education of all the small states to find out whether they still wanted to participate in the VUSSC and, if so, what educational and training objectives they hoped to achieve through it. Two-thirds of the Commonwealth's 32 small states replied affirmatively and proposed topics for the VUSSC to develop, most of which were not degree programmes but shorter, skills-related postsecondary courses in areas like tourism and hospitality management, small business development and entrepreneurship, professional development for the education and health sectors, life skills, construction, fisheries, and disaster management.

Knowing that the IT infrastructure was underdeveloped in many of the small states, especially outside the principal towns, COL suggested to Ministers that despite the use of the term 'virtual' in the VUSSC title, it might be appropriate to develop courses in multi-media or flexible formats, rather than as pure eLearning material. Ministers replied that although they understood the concern, they considered it a priority for the VUSSC to create capacity and capability for eLearning and the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in education, in addition to increasing the range of educational offerings in their countries.

The world of ICT had changed considerably since 2000. With the launch of MIT's OpenCourseWare project and the UK Open University's OpenLearn website, the concept of Open Educational Resources (OERs) had received a major boost. In 2006 COL had created WikiEducator as a space for online collaboration. More generally, the coming together of multi-media and ICTs into a rich and seamless environment was continuing apace, aided by constantly improving bandwidth.

Using ICT to Create OERs

Against this background the representatives of the small states asked COL to facilitate the joint development of eLearning materials in the form of OERs as the first VUSSC activity. COL decided for several reasons that the creation of course materials in each topic area should begin with a three-week face-to-face workshop. First, it was necessary to extend the sense of ownership of the VUSSC from

Ministries of Education out to the tertiary institutions and make this virtual initiative seem real to them. Second, many of the subject experts charged with creating open and distance learning materials had little experience of eLearning and online collaboration, skills that could most readily be acquired in a workshop setting. Third, an important objective was to create an academic community across the small states for each subject area that would remain active after the workshop participants returned home and continued their collaborative work on course development.

In the VUSSC's early activities COL provided support to those people who needed general ICT skills in education as a first step in bridging the digital divide. Once educators have the necessary skills to work online it becomes possible for them to learn how to offer online courses as well. Training was provided to more than 130 professionals in ICT skills for educators and these participants have created course materials which are being posted on COL's website. The participants were asked to share their training with colleagues back in their home countries, with the result that an estimated 500 or more educators who now have significantly improved ICT skills.

Educators had the opportunity to increase their skills in eLearning - both for the creation of online courses and the tutoring of online learners through courses that were offered by the University of the West Indies in collaboration with COL. In addition to providing ICT skills for educators, IT managers received training in the management of IT infrastructure and learning management system thus providing an avenue for IT managers to increase their knowledge and skills in using alternative systems for the offering of eLearning content.

Another preoccupation for COL was expansion and multiplication of eLearning materials that the VUSSC can make available to countries and institutions. The model that is being used is the three-week face-to-face course development workshop, which has served the VUSSC well and has already narrowed the digital divide between participating countries.

Materials and Capacity Development Workshops

To form a network through which small states could all contribute to the development of course materials, participants needed to form relationships with peers in other countries - often on the other side of the world. Furthermore they needed to learn to collaborate online, across national, cultural and sometimes language barriers.

In August 2006 COL hosted its first training and materials development workshop (also known as a "boot camp") in Mauritius for educators from 14 Commonwealth small states. Over a three-week period participants developed online skills to enable them collaboratively to develop learning content for courses in Tour Guiding and Starting Your Own Business. The participants undertook to train colleagues in the skills they had learning after returning home and to continue to contribute to content development.

The success of the VUSSC workshop in Mauritius led to subsequent workshops in Singapore, Trinidad & Tobago, Samoa, Seychelles, and the Bahamas. Each workshop had a focus on content development including capacity development. The aim was to provide learners with a wide variety of educational

opportunities and the flexibility to choose when, where and how they should learn. This takes advantage of one of the greatest strengths of open and distance learning.

Before each workshop is held, four team leaders and a coordinator (who is also a team leader, but from the host country) are brought to Vancouver to undergo four days of orientation on the task of facilitating the workshop. During this time they gain an understanding of the VUSSC concept, as well as the relevance to the VUSSC of the topic area in which they are experts, and they plan a learning module to be created during the workshop. There is some e-mail interaction with all the participants before the workshop (after the team leader orientation), but experience showed that the real interaction starts after people have met face-to-face and spent time getting to know each other. One challenge is that even after spending time together in the workshops, it can be very challenging for busy people to remain actively involved in online communities of practice. People in small developing countries are usually engaged in many simultaneous activities as they battle against significant odds such as limited bandwidth, large class loads and limited teaching resources.

Workshop participants learn in very practical ways. Workshops take place in a computer laboratory and buddy-teaching is the most common manner of learning. Lectures and presentations are kept to a minimum in order to maximise practical, hands-on experience. The practical methodology that has emerged involves searching for available Open Educational Resources on the Internet, copying, pasting and editing the materials into the COL Instructional Design Template, sharing the drafts with other teams (there are usually five teams), re-editing the content and then restarting the cycle. Each small unit is completed, shared and stored until the end of the workshop when they are all merged into one learning module. The module is edited by an external course developer who consults with the group online to finalise the material for posting on COL's website.

Internet-based technologies are used in the workshop so that participants receive ample practice. This enables them to maintain contact long afterwards, still using the IT infrastructure provided by COL. The Instructional Design Template is currently available in multiple formats for ease of use in content creation. The online collaborating platform or workshop space is currently a service called "BaseCamp". These two technologies have shown themselves to be most suitable: all participants use MS Word in their daily work, and the closed, or private online platform gives them the freedom to communicate with each other in a group away from the public gaze. All materials to date have been developed in the English language, following the fairly standard practice across Commonwealth countries.

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation have provided funding for the workshops. This approach has been essential to create momentum for the VUSSC. However, holding course development workshops is expensive. As the eLearning community grows in each country it should be possible in a few years' time to begin collaborative course development in a new area without the necessity of holding a face-to-face workshop – or at least to organise such workshops regionally.

Each of the training workshops 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: Tour Guiding and Starting Your Own Business
2007 - Singapore: Training Educators to Design and Develop ODL Materials
2007 - Trinidad: Life Skills Development
2007 - Samoa: Introduction to Disaster Management
2008 - Seychelles: Introduction to Developing and Managing Small-Scale Fisheries
2008 - Bahamas: Safety Practices in the Building Construction Industry

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 entirely missed the key objective of 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.

Developing learning content has forced COL to investigate copyright licenses more deeply, especially in the case of Creative Commons licenses. Materials that have been developed carry open copyright licenses such as CC-BY, CC-BY-SA and CC-BY-NC and are available on COL's website.

By February 2009, all 32 small states had committed to participate in VUSSC and over 130 people had taken part in workshops facilitated by COL. It is estimated that well over 500 additional people have received training from workshop participants and the use of the learning materials continues to expand the benefits.

The Transnational Qualifications Framework – a First of its Kind

In order to facilitate the certification of courses across the small states, the VUSSC worked with the South African Qualifications Authority to develop a concept paper for the establishment of a Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF) with the purpose of aiding comparability between regions and help give credibility to courses offered by national institutions in small states.

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

• be non-regulatory;
• not replace sectoral, national or regional qualifications frameworks or authorities;

• be based on the principles of simplicity, incrementalism and local involvement; and
• be 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, in order 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. In contrast to national qualifications frameworks that are often prescriptive and comprehensive, the TQF will not be able to 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 is run by a "virtual" TQF Management Committee, as a sub-committee of the VUSSC Interlocutors group who are responsible for the overall VUSSC initiative. The work of both is supported by an Education Specialist based in Vancouver.

Conclusion

The VUSSC is working to strengthen tertiary level institutions in small states as a network of Ministries of Education. It focuses on the development of human resources, the creation and offering of new courses, and the establishment of a transnational accreditation mechanism. Participating countries, comprising land-locked, coastal and island states, all face issues of isolation and brain drain, and are susceptible to the various impacts of climate change.

Through the VUSSC COL has provided a new model of collaboration to governments. The model is based on action learning that enables the methodology to be changed as lessons are learned. The tangible benefits to the VUSSC member countries are: content in various areas that can be adapted and accessed locally; an expanded reservoir of local capability provided by ongoing training from workshop participants; local educators who have become more competent in the use of ICTs in education; students that are empowered through additional open and distance course offerings; and increased access to education through free content.

National institutions are now able to offer educational programmes that are co-branded with VUSSC provided they are approved by the National Qualifications Authority and where applicable, the Regional Qualification Authority.

The establishment of the TQF portal will increase the credibility of programmes offered by small states in all regions of the world. In the meantime programmes that fulfil these requirements are now being posted along with their accreditation status on the new VUSSC website:www.vussc.info.

The VUUSC has been extensively evaluated (Dunlop, 2008a; 2008b) with very positive results. It has proved challenging to evaluate every outcome because even in small states is it impossible to track all uses of the learning materials and the impact of expanding the number of trained people. Furthermore it has had various serendipitous effects.
Commonwealth Ministers of Education met for their most recent triennial conference in Kuala Lumpur in June 2009. Testimony from Ministers from small states at that meeting indicated that they are highly satisfied with the impact of the VUSSC and consider it one of the most successful interventions ever facilitated by an intergovernmental body.

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