

Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth: Mechanisms and Lessons



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Hello everyone and greetings to all panel members. Thanks to UNESCO for the invitation to participate in this event contributing to the World Conference on Higher Education. I will be sharing the mechanisms and lessons from the Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth. I have prepared this presentation with inputs from my colleague Dr Mairette Newman, who leads our work on VUSSC.

Commonwealth of Learning is an intergovernmental organization established by the Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1987 to help governments and institutions use technologies to improve and expand access to education and training. We focus on learning for sustainable development.

The VUSSC is a network of Ministries and educational institutions in 32 small states of the Commonwealth. Initially proposed in 2000 at the Conference of Commonwealth Ministers of Education, Halifax, Canada. It was endorsed by the Ministers of Education in 2003, at 15 CCEM, Edinburgh, Scotland. COL was assigned the role to facilitate VUSSC.

VUSSC is not an institution, rather it is a network that strengthens the capacities of educational institutions in the small states to leverage the power of ICTs using flexible learning. It is an example of south-south cooperation where members collaborate and share content playing the role of producers and consumers.

Over the years, VUSSC has played key role in enhancing professional competencies of faculty members to use ICTs, developed several courses and released these as open educational resources. It provides support to the institutions for effectively using learning management systems and online pedagogies.

Since 2015, it has supported over 30 institutions in the 32 countries reaching about 30,000 learners.

With that background, let me now focus on the mechanisms that have allowed us to achieve these modest successes.

First, the VUSSC is the result of needs articulated by the Ministers arising from the problems of (i) lack of capacity in ICT, (ii) brain drain, and (iii) inadequate access to tertiary education. VUSSC has interlocutors in each of the countries, and a Management Committee that takes decision on what activities to be focused with COL providing the secretariat support. The mechanism encourages consultation, cooperation and ownership.

Initially the lack of quality learning resources became a priority leading to focus on development of open educational resources. This required capacity building for finding, use and creation of OER and developing skills for pedagogies for online learning. Institutions also need support for platform and LMS that the VUSSC provides on need basis for improving institutional effectiveness. In the process VUSSC members have also prioritised quality learning opportunities for people with disabilities, and other marginalised groups. It also focuses on competencies needed for small states.

The VUSSC works like a Community of Practice and has collaboratively developed over 100 courses. For example, the Diploma programme on Sustainable Agriculture was developed by nine institutions in the Commonwealth. COL provides support for activities that the community members prioritise.

Quality assurance plays a key role in making VUSSC a successful model, where capacity building is key. In order to ensure quality of education and skills development, COL brings in expertise within and from outside the small states to offer and develop quality courses and programmes. The transnational qualifications framework developed by VUSSC member states is an important instrument for mapping and ensuring quality of courses and programmes and aligning to national qualifications framework and regional qualifications framework. In addition, VUSSC regularly focuses on monitoring and evaluation of its activities to understand value for money and impact.

One such study indicated that over 77% student in VUSSC supported courses study while working. The cost of education was 69% less than conventional higher education. They also earned about 595 USD more per month than those who were studying face-to-face. It is important to note the qualifications added value to work experience of the learners.

Technology support is key to the success of institutional development plans in VUSSC. COL provides basic LMS and ICT support where needed. This helps institutions to apply new learning and experiment with technology and build local competence in ICT integration.

COL's timely response in disaster mitigation in the small states by supplying APTUS, a low-cost battery powered server that provides last mile access to digital learning materials, when there is no Internet connection. Curriculum aligned curated resources are provided on the APTUS that are accessed by students and teachers. Once such support was provided in Tonga, immediately after the Cyclone Gita.

So, the four key mechanisms deployed at VUSSC help manage and thrive the network with support of institutions and governments. VUSSC's current approach is to focus on future of learning by continuing to promote access to quality of tertiary education, build institutional capacity for sustainable development and thereby national resilience, and contribute to Commonwealth cooperation.

Thank you for your kind attention.