

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth



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Abstract

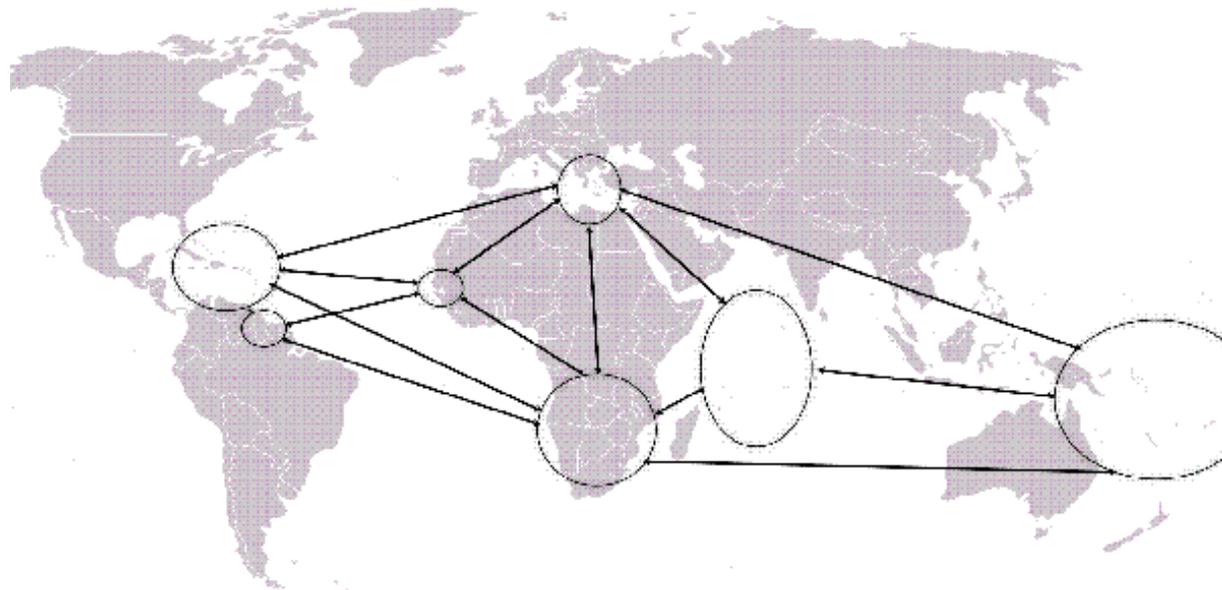
The Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth was conceived by Ministers at their triennial Conference of Commonwealth Ministers of Education in 2000. The Commonwealth of Learning was asked to investigate possible models and presented a proposal to Ministers at their next conference in 2003. The concept of a virtual university as a network was approved and COL was asked to help countries collaborate and strengthen the capacity of national education institutions through this mechanism. The concept of sharing course materials and programmes was a fundamental principle from the start and gained momentum as the trend to open courseware and Open Educational Resources developed. The VUSSC uses a range of materials that conform to different Creative Commons copyright licenses, all of which allow the free reuse and usually, customisation of materials. The VUSSC works with governments and national institutions, many of which have established national qualification frameworks. The VUSSC is working with these governments to establish a “Transnational Qualifications Framework” (TQF). The TQF will be a translation point between the systems in different countries and regions and help provide momentum to the transfer of courses, qualifications and learners between 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 that will be developed in 2008.

Introduction

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) is an initiative of the education ministers of the 32 small countries that account for two-thirds of Commonwealth member states. It is not

a new tertiary institution but a world-spanning collaborative network for strengthening and developing the existing tertiary institutions in these states (Figure 1).

Figure 1



Ministers asked the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) to facilitate the project. We shall first describe the vision that inspired ministers to launch the project in 2000 and how the creation of OER came to be a central element of the initiative. The VUSSC has thrown up interesting issues. We shall discuss how to stimulate and sustain multi-national online collaboration; the relative merits of various software environments; issues of intellectual property and the use of third party material; and the serendipitous effects of the project in participating states.

Background: the Vision

A Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (CCEM) is held every three years. 14CCEM was hosted by Canada in 2000, a year that saw a strong focus on the development agenda. The largest ever meeting of Heads of Government at the United Nations had approved the Millennium Declaration with its eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Earlier the World Education Forum in Dakar had set six targets for achieving the longstanding but elusive objective of Education for All (EFA).

In sharp contrast to this concern for improving the lot of the world's poorer people, the rich world was carried away by the dotcom frenzy. The Internet began transforming communication between people and creating new methods of doing business. Online communication also seemed to have the potential to transform education, so both prophets and vendors did not hesitate to claim that older educational methods would soon be swept into the dustbin of history. Henceforward all true learning would take place in front of the computer screen.

The ministers were in a quandary. The MDGs and the EFA goals called for more access to education at all levels but the role of the Internet was ambiguous. It might provide opportunities to expand education

but it also threatened to make traditional approaches to teaching and learning obsolete.

The ministers from the small states were determined that their countries should engage with the online world and increase access to programmes of study in their countries but doubted that they had the critical mass, of either expertise or equipment, to engage with virtual learning on their own. They did not want to remain tributary, as so often in the past, to the technologies, systems and materials developed by the larger states.

They believed that by working together as a network of small states they could nurture a collective capacity for online learning and harness these new developments for the benefit of their peoples. They called this network the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) and asked COL to develop a formal proposal under the supervision of a ministerial working group.

The group met in Seychelles in 2003 and agreed a proposal for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) that was presented to Ministers at 15CCEM later that year (COL, 2003) (*see list of participating states below*). It contained the following statement:

‘The vision that emerged for a virtual university serving small states was one of a consortium of institutions, enabled by appropriate ICT applications, working together in practical ways to plan programmes, develop the required content and ensure the delivery of those programmes and support services to learners.’

It also included the sentence:

‘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.’

And it also noted that a virtual university could benefit small states by:

‘Providing accreditation systems to develop quality standards and ensure that they are met’.

The overriding objective for the VUSSC that emerged from the original proposal to ministers is that it should help institutions in the small states to serve learners better. 15CCEM approved the proposal and asked COL to facilitate its implementation.

An Evolving Context

By the time COL began working with the small states in 2004 to implement the plan for the VUSSC, the context for its creation had changed in several respects.

First, the atmosphere of urgency generated by the dotcom frenzy of 2000 already seemed 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.

Second, the plan approved by the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers 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 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 more from the bottom up rather than from the top down, by working in the area of capacity building rather than of constructing a consortium head office. It was quickly found that countries were not keen to have a new institution created that would compete with their existing institutions. The new organisation would need to help to build capacity of 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 task had not been done before. Although there were examples of consortiums and collaborative deals, there was no clear example for a capacity building network of 30+ countries that wanted to increase their own capacity collaboratively.

COL began the task at the end of 2004 by canvassing the ministers of education of each of the small states to ask them 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 countries replied affirmatively and gave a list of topics for the VUSSC to develop. Most 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.

Third, the world of ICT had changed considerably since 2000. With the launch of MIT's OpenCourseWare project the concept of Open Educational Resources (OER) 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.

Creating OER by International Online Collaboration

Against this background the representatives of the small states asked COL to facilitate the joint development of eLearning materials in the form of OER 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 spread 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 that would remain active after the workshop participants returned home and continued their collaborative work on course development.

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

2006	Mauritius	Tourism and Entrepreneurship
2007	Singapore	Professional Development for Education
2007	Trinidad & Tobago	Life Skills
2007	Samoa	Disaster Management
2008	Seychelles	Fisheries
2008	Bahamas	Construction

Responsibilities

An initiative of this kind needs to be planned to accommodate change and extensive consultations. Policy level meetings were held for government interlocutors and their decisions on topic areas were used to form the series of workshops. They also supported the Ministers' request to strengthen qualification systems and to find ways to transfer courses, qualifications and learners between countries. The Interlocutors decided in 2008 to form a VUSSC Management Committee that would work in close collaboration with COL in the ongoing management of the VUSSC activities.

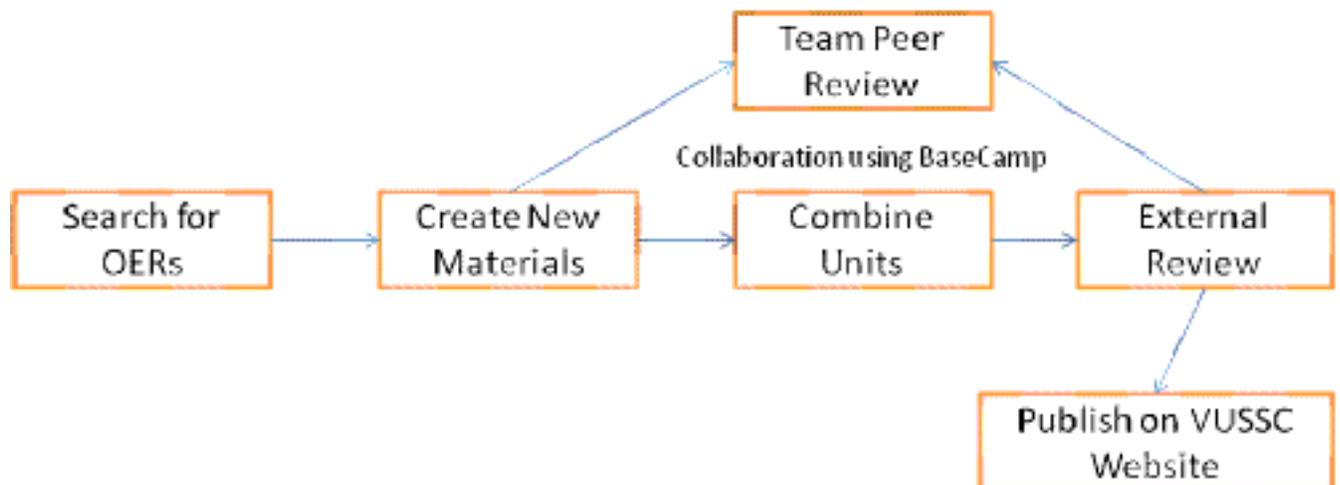
The Workshops

Four team leaders and a coordinator (who is also a team leader, but from the host country) are brought to Vancouver about a month before the workshop. They undergo four days of orientation on the task of

facilitating the workshop. During this time, they gain an understanding of the VUSSC concept, the relevance of the topic area in which they are an expert to VUSSC, and they plan a learning module to be created during the workshop. There is some interaction with all the participants before the workshop (after the team leader orientation), but experience shows that most real interaction starts after people have met face-to-face and spent time getting to know each other. Even after spending time together in the workshops, it can be very challenging to keep busy people involved in online communities of practice. It is usual for people in developing countries to be involved on many simultaneous activities as they try to work against significant odds such as limited bandwidth, large class loads and limited teaching resources.

Participants of the workshops learn in a very practical way. Workshops take place in a computer laboratory and buddy-teaching is the most used manner of learning. Lectures and presentations are kept to a minimum and practical, hands-on experience is maximised. 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 (Figure 2). 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.

Figure 2



Online technologies are used in the workshop so that participants receive ample practice. They are able to maintain contact long afterwards, still using the IT infrastructure provided by COL. The Instructional Design Template is currently only available in MS Word format due to the use of macros that facilitate the replication of information throughout the materials. The online workshop space is currently a service called "[BaseCamp](#)" which is available on a subscription basis. These two technologies have shown themselves to be most suitable: all participants use MS Word in their daily work, while the closed, or private online workshop space gives them the freedom to communicate with each other in a group away from the public glare. All materials to date have been developed in the English language, following the

fairly standard practice across Commonwealth countries. With materials carrying one of the Creative Commons open licenses, it would be easy for a person, group or institution to choose to translate the materials into any other language and post a new version for others to use.

Thanks to the support of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation it has been possible to hold such events for the launch of each new topic. 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.

To date, some 200 people have participated either in policy-level meetings or immersion training workshops. The participants of international workshops have trained others in their home countries and gone on to have notable impacts on their own educational systems (Dunlop, 2008). An important by-product of the workshops is that each participant passes on the ICT skills they have acquired to other colleagues once they get home, thus increasing substantially the pool of ICT-capable people in the ministries and institutions of each country.

Monitoring and Evaluation

COL decided that this should be approached as an action learning or learning initiative and that as experience was gained, changes would be made to the methodologies. To facilitate this, the Research Unit of Simon Fraser University was contracted to perform ongoing research and to provide advice. As experience has been gained, these workshops have become progressively more effective as measured by the comments received from participants on the workshops, the amount of material created in the workshops and the extent of subsequent follow-up in the participating countries. The monitoring and evaluation report of September 2008 (Dunlop, 2008) stated these outcomes and impacts of the VUSSC initiative (p.3):

- *VUSSC has achieved outcomes at the individual, institutional and national levels.*
- *Outcomes at the individual level have included: Bootcamp participants have enhanced global perspectives and increased IT and collaborative leadership skills, and networking, enhanced marketability of participants in VUSSC in-country follow-up workshops, National Teacher of the Year Award given to a VUSSC Bootcamp Team Leader (The Bahamas), and Bootcamp participants have gone on to graduate degrees as a result of increased confidence and motivation through VUSSC experience.*
- *Outcomes at the institutional level have included: integration of VUSSC materials into guidance counseling and allied health work, into high school fisheries curriculum, into disaster management courses, into teacher training courses, into a Business Management certificate, into courses for regional governments, into National Open Schools curriculum, into rural training centres, and gaining institutional experience in operationalizing an eLearning strategy (“institutional lessons”), development*

of a roadmap from a certificate to a Master's degree in Environmental Education and Sustainable Development, movement of an institution toward a more blended delivery approach, transformation of application and registration system (now online), and primary teachers have developed websites for their classes through VUSSC follow-up workshops.

- *Outcomes at the national level have included: increased networking and collaboration among national stakeholders, the development of an in-country reservoir of resource personnel in needed skill areas, and increased government commitment to ODL.*

- *Achieved and anticipated impacts have included: increased networking and collaboration on a global scale, acceptance of ODL at the post-secondary level, national movement toward technology-assisted education, and cost-reduction at the national level from sending less students overseas due to increased access through VUSSC.*

Issues and Challenges in Creating OERs

The VUSSC started from the principle that the eMaterials it created should be available free of charge, not only to institutions in the participating states but worldwide. Initially, learning content was created on [WikiEducator](#) – a wiki created by COL in 2006 – with the intention that finished learning content would be available directly from the wiki. Firstly, the method required a level of technical competence that many educators found difficult to reach. While a few settled into the “wiki syntax” very quickly, others were still struggling after two weeks with coding that was new to them. Secondly, the concept of ‘free content’ required that materials be made available freely and openly for any purpose at all. Materials were therefore developed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike copyright license (CC-BY-SA). Attribution (BY) means that users must acknowledge the source of any material they take. Share Alike (SA) requires that any adaptation of the original version must be licensed under the same or similar license for others to use. All material copyright licensed in this way therefore may be used for any purpose, including for the generation of profit with no recourse to the person or organisation that contributed the materials.

As the VUSSC developed we found that these requirements can sometimes restrict one’s options and so, in the spirit of being a learning organisation, changes were made to the methodology. VUSSC groups need to come to terms with copyright issues while they learn to collaborate online and learn how to create distance-learning materials.

Firstly, the VUSSC experience suggests that when groups develop courseware collaboratively online some prefer first to limit access to the working drafts to their own group members, and then to present these to a wider audience when they feel they have a presentable product. Since this need for a private space is more difficult to accomplish in a wiki environment, it was made easier by incorporating a project management system (currently BaseCamp).

Secondly, VUSSC teams often find it more productive if they can adopt good teaching material that is available elsewhere free of charge. It is, however, not always easy to find materials compatible with the

CC-BY-SA copyright license of the wiki that was initially used. In a few cases, permission was granted by the rights holder to release materials without restriction (e.g. the Life Skills materials), but in other cases (e.g. the Disaster Management materials), rights holders preferred to restrict them to non-commercial or non-profit use (the CC-NC restriction). This made the materials incompatible with the copyright license of the wiki. Materials on fisheries from the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) were available free of charge, but also carried a restriction on the rights of users to not generate profit from the materials 6. Other examples of materials that carry the CC-NC restriction may be seen on the UNU, MIT and UKOU OpenLearn websites. These and many others form useful repositories of learning materials that may be used on a non-profit basis.

Another issue the teams faced was the familiarity of the tools being used. Interviews and spot surveys showed that all participants use Microsoft Word in their normal working environments and many found changing to wiki syntax a significant challenge. The teams therefore changed to using the Commonwealth of Learning's Instructional Design Template (COL, 2006) to structure their material for teaching. This template is presently available only in Microsoft Word 2003, but it has been an easy tool for participants to use, since all of them to date use Microsoft Word. Participants quickly learned how to apply heading styles and formatting to the materials. The automated features in the template help to replicate headings and other information quickly, reducing the time necessary to make course material look good. COL has embarked on a process to create new versions of the template in MS Word 2007 and OO Writer 3.0. These two formats have been selected as they are believed to be the format standards used by up to 95% of computer users (estimated to be about 85% Word and 10% Writer).

In summary, to overcome the challenges encountered, COL has evolved the following approach to the course development process:

1. Search for good source materials that may be used free of charge for the topic and create a draft of new materials with the necessary customisations;
2. Apply the instructional design template to it;
3. Share the result using the BaseCamp online project management tool.

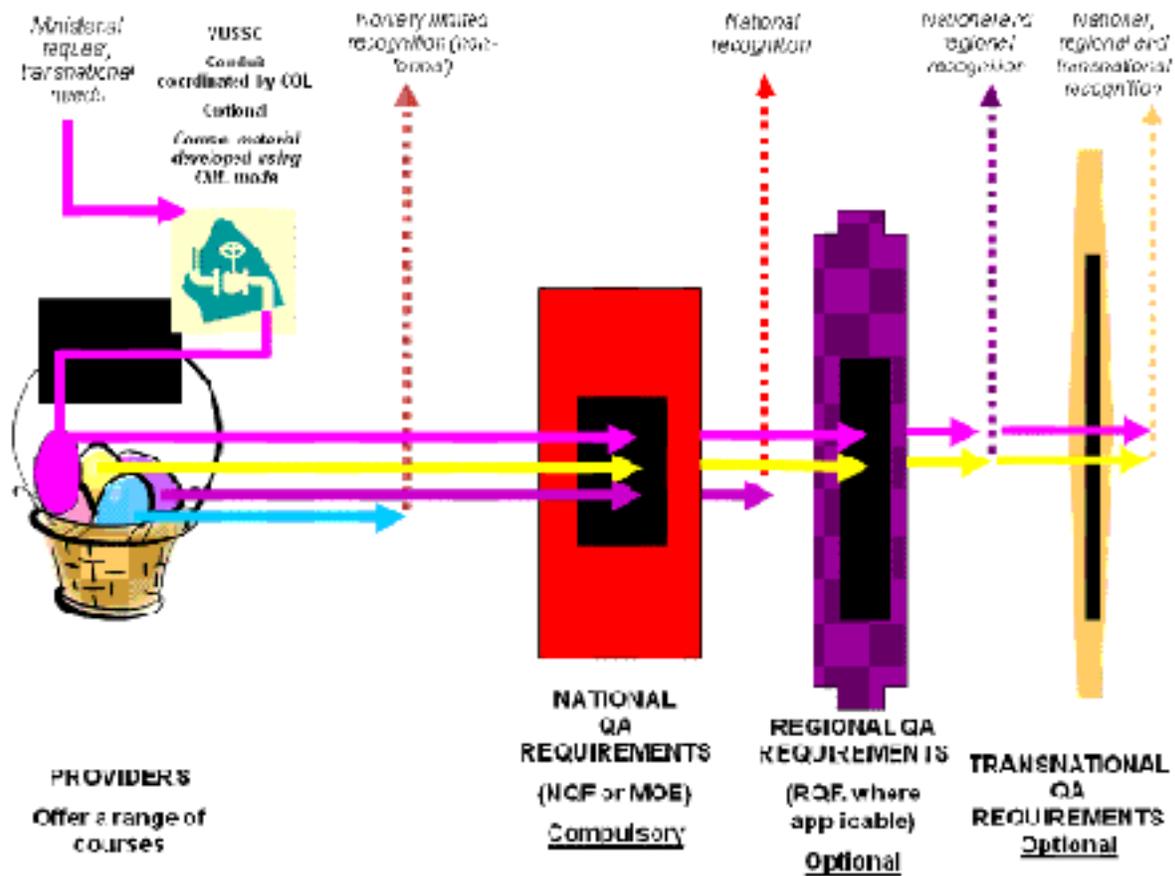
Once a good draft of the materials has been prepared, it is available freely on COL's website, under the copyright licenses that are permitted by the original rights holders, or under CC-BY or CC-BY-SA if possible. Any organisation may then download, adapt and use the materials free of charge.

Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF)

By the end of 2007 nearly all the Commonwealth small states had joined the VUSSC initiative. Those participating states are scattered all over the world, as Figure 1 shows. In order to facilitate the use of jointly developed courses in all states the VUSSC has worked with the South African Qualifications Authority to develop a Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF). Its purpose is to aid comparability between regions and help give credibility to the eLearning courses developed within the framework of the VUSSC and offered internationally.

During 2008 an Internet portal or hub will be created for VUSSC that 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 portal. 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 relates to the TQF.

The added human capacity created through the VUSSC workshops is expected to support national institutions as they begin to develop and run new programmes. This has begun to be reflected in the M&E. Institutions have reported that the modules developed during the workshops can be incorporated into new programmes of study. Some of these programmes are expected to find their way through the accreditation process to the VUSSC/TQF website (Figure 3). At that time, participating countries will be able to state that “VUSSC is offering programmes”. It will still not, at that stage, be a separate, international agency or institution offering new programmes, but rather the existing national institutions in the small states that choose to co-brand their programmes with VUSSC after having met the agreed checks.



Learners will register for these programmes with the knowledge that programmes offered through the portal 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 Transnational Qualification Framework. This question of credibility is particularly important for small states, some of which, advertently or inadvertently, have acquired reputations as havens for degree mills.

Next Steps

With initial ICT literacy rapidly on the rise and a Transnational Qualification Framework in the offing, the next steps are to establish a TQF website through which credible online programmes will be offered by institutions in small states. Online courses for VUSSC participants are planned to begin in the second half of 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 online education.

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 mostly very susceptible to various impacts of climate change.

With no prior examples to follow that quite matched the circumstances and requests, a new model was developed, along with an action learning approach that enabled the methodology to be changed based on lessons learned. The 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. Materials are developed using COL's Instructional Design Template and shared using online project management services. 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](#).

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 will help to increase the credibility of programmes offered by small states.

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 that will be developed in 2008.

References

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Footnotes

1. Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Belize, Botswana, Cyprus, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Kiribati, Lesotho, Maldives, Malta, Mauritius, Namibia, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, St. Kitts & Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Swaziland, The Bahamas, The Gambia, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tuvalu, Vanuatu.