

Education Within Borders From Beyond Borders



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Abstract

The ever-expanding demand for higher education poses a special challenge for small states. Historically many of their citizens have studied at traditional universities overseas but the increasing foreign exchange costs to individuals and governments precludes sending people abroad as a core strategy for achieving mass higher education. Small states now want to offer more postsecondary education on their territories, not just to save money but also to reduce brain drain and to enhance the cultural, economic, and social benefits associated with local higher education.

However, countries with populations of less than a quarter of a million people do not have the critical mass to create national institutions in the image of those traditional universities at which their elites studied overseas. The Commonwealth of Learning is helping small states to invent new types of postsecondary institutions that achieve the goal of providing local education at reasonable cost. This means combining several approaches: expanding local conventional provision; structuring partnerships with overseas institutions; expanding the use of distance learning, both synchronous and asynchronous; and adapting global intellectual resources to local needs.

The paper explores an important new phenomenon that recasts the old debates about balancing nationalism and regionalism in a new light. This is the rapid deepening of a global pool of Open Educational Resources (OERs) of high quality. These allow institutions to offer authentically local curricula developed to world standards of quality. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is a first step in exploiting this new trend.

Introduction

UNESCO's July 2009 World Conference on Higher Education in Paris gave prominence to the difficult dilemmas faced by small states in expanding their higher education systems. The Governor-General of St. Lucia, Dame Pearlette Louisy, spoke in plenary session and also contributed to a pre-conference policy forum on tertiary education in small states (Louisy and Crossley, 2009). A paper by Atchoarena, presented to the same forum, explored in more detail the challenges posed to these small states by the out migration of students and skilled workers (Atchoarena, 2009).

The challenges are easy to state but difficult to overcome. More and more people seek higher education in the belief that it will give them better lives, yet in an economic downturn states are less able to fund the expansion of local higher education or to sponsor citizens to study abroad. Many citizens find their own ways to pay for study abroad. In 2008 nearly one-third of St. Lucia's students were abroad and for Belize and Tonga the figure was more than half (Atchoarena, 2009, p. 3).

Small countries like Antigua & Barbuda, Samoa, Seychelles and St. Lucia are working hard to expand the indigenous provision of higher education, using four main arguments:

- Pressing local demand.
- Training local people for needs.
- Giving qualified people professional challenges at home.
- Regional institutions (e.g. USP, UWI) focus too much on their 'campus countries'.

Louisy and Crossley (2009, p. 4) point out that although Sir Arthur Lewis, St. Lucia's 1979 Nobel Laureate in Economics, became the first Vice-Chancellor of the regional University of the West Indies, he never ceased to urge the importance of having a university at home in St. Lucia because, as he said:

The function of a university is not confined to teaching students...Apart from teaching, a university contributes to its community through the participation of its teachers in the life of the country, and through its research into local problems...A body of one or two hundred first class intellects can make an enormous difference to the quality of its cultural, social, political and business life.

In addressing the practical task of creating a viable university in a small country the authors list a series of obstacles to be overcome:

- There is the basic challenge of expanding the tertiary sector. Projections and targets are easy to make (e.g. the target of a tertiary enrolment ratio of 20% set by CARICOM for 2015) and demand seems to be there. But countries looking to donors to finance new infrastructure are likely to be disappointed. There is less money about, donors may not see tertiary education as a priority for their funds, and even if they do tend to favour multi-lateral regional initiatives rather than bi-lateral national ones.
- This last point relates directly to the balancing of nationalism and regionalism, which is the second obstacle identified by Louisy and Crossley (2009, p. 6). They point out that St. Lucia has

been second to none in its commitment to regionalism. It hosts the nine-country Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States and contributes to the budget of the University of the West Indies. However, they note that: *'the state has to give priority consideration to its national interests and imperatives... and to strike a balance between striking out on its own and developing its tertiary education sector to respond to both local and global needs and locking itself into a more unwieldy and sometimes inflexible regional system which is not always sensitive or responsive to local needs'*.

- The third obstacle is to strengthen research capacity. At a time when even the world's largest universities are concluding that they cannot afford to conduct research across the whole academic waterfront, the choice of research foci for small university colleges is a real challenge. The aim for small states is to have citizens who can understand and use research that is relevant to national needs. This requires people trained in research but does not require them all to be engaged in original research of their own.

I shall first make some general remarks about expanding or creating university institutions in small countries and then explore that how the new phenomenon of open educational resources can assist the process – in particular by putting an end to the dichotomy between nationalism and regionalism.

Expanding tertiary institutions in small states: bringing it all together

The only way for a small state to achieve the critical mass of students necessary for a viable university institution is to bring together, in one structure if not in one place, all the components of contemporary tertiary education. It is necessary to include all levels and modes of study, which means that the institution will not be a small college catering only to full-time students doing degree courses. Degree courses will be just one element in a curriculum that includes technical and vocational programmes, pre-university certificates, diploma courses and professional development courses of varied length in various subjects. The challenge of designing the curriculum is to ensure that, as far as possible, individual courses can fit into as many programmes as possible, so as to achieve economies of scale.

The institution must also be open to various modes of study. There will be people studying full time and a majority studying part time. Some study will take place in classrooms; much will take place at a distance, either at home or in study centres where programmes can be accessed online.

Finally, the institution will have various overseas partner institutions, both private and public, contributing to its curriculum, often building on relationships with other countries that go back many years. It may also have partnerships with private institutions within the country.

Holding such a disparate enterprise together – let alone making it work cost-effectively – is a challenge to all contemporary universities, in big states as in small. Fortunately information and communications technology can facilitate the integration required in many ways. It can cut costs by allowing students to conduct many administrative operations themselves, not least ensuring that their course choices are compatible with their programme aspirations. Having courses available in flexible learning formats makes it possible to cope with various modes of study and can also help to integrate local and offshore offerings.

We suggest, however, that the most radical and helpful contribution of ICTs lies in use of open educational resources, because these have the potential to transform the tension between nationalism and regionalism into a very positive force. For this reason I have entitled this address: *Education within borders from beyond borders*.

Open Educational Resources

Open Educational Resources are learning resources in digital formats that are freely available for adaptation and use by educators and learners, without an accompanying need to pay royalties or license fees. OER are not synonymous with online learning or eLearning: many of the resources produced –while shareable in a digital format (both online and via offline formats such as CD-ROM) – are printable.

But the key feature of OER for small states is that they can break the culture of dependency and import/export that has dogged their previous attempts to expand higher education. This is not wishful thinking. In 2000 the Ministers of Education of the Commonwealth Small States launched a programme, the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC), which has now shown the power of OER to help states expand higher education without any threat to their autonomy.

Since the idea of the VUSSC was launched – and particularly since it began to be implemented in 2005 – it has made two essential breakthroughs.

First it has enabled many hundreds of educators and officials in the small states to acquire advanced ICT skills, most particularly those required for collaborating online to develop course content. We noted a moment ago that all strategies for expanding higher education in small states require greater use of ICTs, so this training is generally helpful in many ways.

Second, the VUSSC has led to the creation of a growing bank of digitally –held course material, developed by the small states themselves, on a range of postsecondary topics identified as important by Ministers.

How the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth works

How does this work? The Ministers' basic idea was that that ICTs would allow countries to work together to develop eLearning resources that they did not have the capacity to create individually (West & Daniel, 2009). The breakthrough that OER make possible is that the outcome is not the same standard package for everyone, but a quality learning resource that can be adapted precisely to the needs of each state, institution and student group.

To create OER in each new subject the VUSSC brings experts from the interested countries together with one of small states playing host. They spend three weeks working intensively on the two key outcomes: training participants in collaboration through ICTs and beginning the development of OER material. Let me give the examples of the earliest and most recent of these workshops.

The first of these workshops was held in Mauritius in 2006 to develop a programme in Tourism and Entrepreneurship. Experts from 13 small states took part, with team leaders nominated by Trinidad and Tobago, Botswana, Seychelles and Samoa, and a coordinator based in Mauritius. This first three-week

long event was nicknamed a “boot camp” because of the intense basic training that took place. There were two rules. First, each participant had to share their training with at least five colleagues when they got home. Second, they had to continue working on OER material through online collaboration. Today the OER in Ecotourism that have been produced are in use in institutions in various countries.

The most recent workshop is taking place in Maldives as I speak. Here the subject is agriculture. There is very little agriculture in Maldives, which imports 90% of what it consumes, but the government has decided to use this VUSSC workshop as a catalyst for developing and modernizing the sector with the aim of reducing imports by 20%. Experts from 18 small states will be taking part with team leaders from Mauritius, Namibia, Samoa and Trinidad & Tobago.

Between these two events six other course development workshops have been held: in Singapore for Teacher Education; in Trinidad for Life Skills; in Samoa for Disaster Management; in Seychelles for Fisheries; in The Bahamas for Construction Safety; and in Samoa for Port Management and Stevedoring. Materials from all these workshops are now used to enrich curricula in small states for various forms of teaching and learning. Very importantly, the academics involved in these programmes continue to constitute a globe-spanning group of experts that helps to counter the disciplinary isolation that can be a challenge for educators in small states.

This approach of expanding curricula through course development workshops has given good results. It creates a spirit of teamwork among equals that has been particularly appreciated by the smaller small states. As the number of academics with high ICT skills in each state increases it will become less necessary to hold these face-to-face workshops. Already institutions are developing eLearning course materials with their own resources and making them available for adaptation by other institutions and states through the VUSSC network.

The Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF)

This has led to another important VUSSC development, which is the creation of a Transnational Qualifications Framework. This was done with the help of the South African Qualifications Authority. Its purpose is to show how a course prepared in one part of the world fits into the qualifications framework in another. The VUSSC TQF is not itself a qualifications framework but a translation device. It shows how courses and programmes prepared within one framework fit within another.

It is particularly important for small states’ institutions to be able to show that the courses they offer are properly accredited, since larger states sometimes suspect small states of being havens for degree mills. In order to feature on the VUSSC course list a course has to emanate from an accredited institution in its country and to have secured regional accreditation where that exists.

The course is then featured on the VUSSC website and the TQF shows how it fits into qualification frameworks around the world. Use of the course materials is not, of course restricted to Commonwealth small states. Since the materials are Open Educational Resources they are open for any institution to adapt and use, although institutions outside the VUSSC network would need to make their own accreditation arrangements.

Conclusion

We have argued that in order to offer a viable range of university programmes the small states must bring together all elements of the modern higher education enterprise into one structure. This means all postsecondary level programmes; all modes of study; and all credible providers. Extensive use of contemporary information and communications technology is the key to making this work.

One particularly promising ICT development is Open Educational Resources. These allow small states' institutions to develop quality course material collaboratively and then version it to suit particular national needs and student groups. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, which is mechanism for collaboration on OER managed by 32 small states, is showing how OER can help small states expand and enrich their postsecondary curricula. It has also facilitated the training of hundreds of small states' academics and officials in advanced techniques for online collaboration. These people will make a vital contribution to the general expansion of higher education in their countries.

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